VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

JUNE 1987 ONE DOLLAR

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

You know, I'm glad I'm not a wildlife biologist. I came mighty close to being one, until I looked a statistics course right straight in the eye in grad school and said, "Nope. I ain't gonna make this one." And until recently, I've regretted that lack of nerve. But not anymore. I now realize that even after suffering through graduate school, and all those mornings of checking traps, recording data, and night after night of crunching data, you've still got to convince people that you really do know something about wildlife.

I think that's because there are a lot of people who have spent more days in the field than most of us have drawing breath. They can tell you *exactly* what that big old buck on their land is doing practically every day of the year, and count off the number of scrapes and rubs he's made every fall. So, they can't imagine what some spunky wildlife biologist who hasn't even walked his land the first time can tell him about the health of the wildlife in his area.

The paradox of the situation is that the keen-eyed farmer without a doubt *does* know the wildlife on his land, better than anyone. And that's good and valuable knowledge. But the wildlife biologist involved in wildlife management has to think bigger than that. He has to understand what the farmer knows, and then reach beyond that. Because he's not just managing individuals; he's managing *populations*.

And that is sometimes hard for people to understand. It's hard to convince somebody that knowing the habits of wildlife on his own property doesn't mean he's qualified to assess the health of a wildlife population. It's kind of like, even though you've figured out your own mother, you've still got a whole lot more figuring to do to explain the quirkiness of the female mind.

And, wildlife biologists do a whole lot of figuring before they will nod their heads and say they *know* something. That's because they depend on what they know to shed light on frighteningly complex questions.

That's why when you question a wildlife biologist about the latest wildlife puzzle, like the mystery of the quail decline or the waterfowl situation, more often than not, he'll reply, "It depends. . . "

Now, a sportsman doesn't like that kind of talk. It just doesn't sit well with a man who, without even stopping to swallow, can spin a hundred tales explaining *exactly* why he missed that old 8-pointer last year. So, they're simply not sure about a man who won't give them a straight answer.

But, what most people don't realize is that there's a big difference between not knowing the answer to a problem, and not knowing anything at all. A biologist's "I don't know"is a whole lot different from a city boy's ignorance. When you've reached the point where you're studying wildlife populations, you know a heckuva lot. You've got to, because you're trying to figure out answers to complex questions that have never been tackled before. And when you're breaking new ground, you better be darned sure that you're familiar with everything that has been learned before—because the worst thing that can happen is that you'll waste time and money breaking old ground or watching your theory crumble because you didn't do your homework. Plus, when you're looking at wildlife populations, the answers are not as simple as they are when you deal with individuals. All the variables, all the interactions are multiplied, and there are now a hundred ways to approach a problem. And the decision lies in which of those hundred ways you should test out first.

Mack Walls, a Commission supervising game biologist, started in on a tale one afternoon in his inimitable southwest Virginia drawl. He was talking about what happens when a bunch of wildlife biologists get together. "It's hard to get everybody to agree on something," he grinned, "because wildlife management isn't all science. There's a lot of *art* to it, too. You've got to try to look at information in ways that it hasn't been looked at before to find solutions. And everybody ends up having their own solution. That's when the fun begins."

But, while wildlife biologists are trying to decide on which theory they should test out next, we're still grumpy 'cause we can't get any simple, beautiful answers out of them. So, while we're waiting, we resort to the old myths, some simple cause-and-effect reasoning, for the plain ol' satisfaction it gives us. "Want to know why there's runty deer on my land? 'Cause some dang-blasted hunters keep shooting the nice big old bucks, and the runty bucks is the only ones that's left to breed with the does." Now, *that* is an answer that has a ring to it. It's easy to figure out, and doesn't make us think too hard about such things as the effect habitat loss, disease, and competition might have on a herd.

Problem is, it's plain wrong, and it's not the kind of scientific reasoning paired with creative insight and hard work that brought about the restoration of deer and turkey in this state. And it's not the kind of reasoning that will ever save a single species of wildlife.

Simple answers are still wonderful. But the painful fact of the matter is that when you're dealing with wildlife, they often lie. And wildlife biologists have known that all along.

Dennis Shepherd

Dedicated to the Conservation of Virginia's Wildlife and Related Natural Resources

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Fly Fishing in the Afternoon

There's nothing like watching bream or bass bend your fly rod nearly double on a still June afternoon.

by Stephen C. Ausband

Largemouth bass; photo by Doug Stamm.

It was late afternoon, almost sunset, by the time Wendell and I reached the rickety old dock that stretched into the shallow lake in south-central Virginia. The air was still and warm, with that softness that you get sometimes down here in the evenings after a hot day. It was a perfect time for fly rods.

An old man on the dock eyed our equipment with some suspicion, much the way you might look at a man who brings only 12 shells to a dove shoot. I could tell he did not like our equipment, and I was not sure he liked us much better. It must have seemed uppity to him, our expecting to catch a real bass on a rod with all the backbone of a slat from a venetian blind. What was worse, we were not offering the fish plastic worms or minnows, but impossibly light balsa wood and feather contraptions that looked a little like pregnant garden spiders. We loaded the rods and tackle boxes into the skiff.

"You boys looking to catch some bream with them little bitty rods?"

"Nossir," Wendell said. "We're going to try to pick up a few bass around those lily pads. They were hitting yesterday about dark."

"Humph. What's the biggest thing you reckon you can handle with that rod?"

I'll have to hand it to Wendell. He never blinked, never hesitated. Just opened his mouth and the words came out. "I caught a 200-pounder on this rod right here." He said nothing else, just went back to straightening things in the floor of the little wooden boat. The old man smelled a rat, but he had probably read stories about people catching giant tarpon on fly rods, and he hesitated to dismiss us entirely.

"Must have been quite a fight, " he muttered finally.

"Liked to have killed me," said Wendell. Then he winked at me and started the motor, and we left the old fellow on the dock, scratching his head.

"I might not have killed you," I said later, "but I probably would have hurt you some if I could have caught you. How come you didn't tell that guy I was the '200-pounder'?"

"He didn't ask," said Wendell.

The first days of June in southern Virginia are a magic time, when all the promises of spring come true. The delicate new green-golds of April and May are all gone, having given way to the darker greens of summer. The air and water are dependably warm now, and the threats of freakish cold snaps that will spoil the fishing or kill the gardens are distant memories. And by a lake or stream or even a farm pond in June, the earth seems redundant with life. Alders and cattails and rushes grow in thick profusion, and on every log or stump, turtles compete for sunning room. In the evening, bats fly low over the water, chasing clouds of insects, and from time to time you can spot the V-shaped wake of a swimming water snake, its head and part of its back wet and glossy in the fading light. On the opposite bank, a great blue heron, angular and hard-eyed, with a bill like a scimitar, stalks frogs in the shallows. You're watching the world wake up, come back to life again, as it has come back a million, million times before you watched it, as it will come back a million, million times after you have ceased to watch.

For me, late afternoons in June are also fly rod time. I stand on the edge of a large farm pond, watching the water ripple as fish begin to feed on the surface. The bream are noisy, making greedy popping sounds as they prey on insects around the edges of lily pads. Occasionally, a bass swirls by a mass of vegetation, having just killed or missed an evening meal. I tie on a large popping bug, push the little aluminum boat into the pond, and move silently toward the swirls.

Bass are probably as easy to catch in May and June as they ever get, and it is by no means certain that one way of taking them then has any real advantage over another. And bream are downright ravenous on afternoons in the early summer. The fish are still likely to be near the spawning areas in shallow water, and while it is true that a bass on the nest can be difficult to interest in a meal, by now these fish have ended the spawn, and they are very cooperative. Topwater plugs such as the Devil's Horse and buzz baits that run right on the surface of the water account for a fair share of the bass taken in June, but for me the most satisfying fishing to be had then is with a fly rod and a popping bug. I feel more in tune with everything around me; the steady, graceful motion of the fly rod seems less out of place than the whirring and splashing of a baitcasting outfit, and I like watching the bug settle on the water with just enough attendant ripples to give the thing a semblance of life. It's a watching and stalking game, almost more like hunting than fishing, and I am careful not to splash the bug awkwardly on the surface and alarm the fish.

I take the oars and move the boat toward a shallow, weedy flat. Cattails edge into the shallows, and I can see swirls around the dark outlines of stumps close to shore. I let the boat ghost to a stop a dozen yards from the swirls and begin stripping line from the reel.

The water is clear, and sometimes I can just make out the shape of a fish before it sinks out of sight. I make a few false casts, not letting the line strike the water, pulling out enough of the line to reach the shadowy shape I think I see at the edge of a downed log. Then the line settles noiselessly on the surface, the thin leader turns over in slow motion, and the bug lands on the surface with no more splash than if it had been dropped there by hand. I wait.

The circle of ripples around the popping bug dies out. I raise the rod tip just a bit and give the line a twitch. At the other end the bug chugs and stutters once or twice on the surface. More ripples. Then a shadow appears underneath the bug, and the shadow grows darker and darker and erupts in a splash. There is a hole in the water where the bug was, and I raise the rod sharply now and set the hook.

The bass jumps once, twice, then heads for deep water. But now he is fighting the willowy resistance of the eight-foot fly rod with its constant pressure, and not many bass escape once they head for the deep water where there are no stumps to fray the tiny leader.

In a few more minutes he is beside the boat, and I can see his dark green back and bars along his sides as he lies on the surface. This is not a heavy-bodied female, no trophy waiting to be photographed or mounted. It's just a good, honest bass—about a pound and a half—and a very nice antagonist on a fly rod.

Some of the literature on fly fishing can be pretty intimidating. Dedicated purists who have waded in icy mountain streams from here to British Columbia and argue over nymphs and hackles and the amount of taper in a steelhead line, can make the whole business sound about as formidable as a course in non-Euclidean geometry. The directions for flycasting in A.J. McClane's *New Standard Fishing Encyclopedia* run to just over 12 pages of double-column print and cover such niceties as the double haul, the snap pickup, and the roll cast.

All in good time. Fortunately, bass and bream are forgiving creatures, especially on warm afternoons, and practically anything a beginner can do with a fly rod—aside from sticking it in the water and trying to spear fish with it—is likely to be at least moderately successful. All one has to remember at first is that the line itself provides the weight for casting. The lure weighs almost nothing, and it merely hitches a ride on the line. The business of casting

"The rod whips steadily overhead, the line shoots out a little more of itself each time, as you concentrate on a piece of shoreline cover or the dark shadow of a submerged stump."

"You lay the popper on the water as if it were a piece of down from one of the nearby cattails. The ripples die. You twitch it once, twice, and watch the water."

a popping bug is actually a process of casting fly line. If you do things right, or even mostly right, the line will settle on the water in such a way that the nearly weightless leader and lure flip out ahead of it. If you do things pretty awkwardly, the line will slap the water on both ends of the cast, the lure may or may not stick in your ear or the ear of your fishing partner, and most of the fish will leave. If you can keep the hook out of someone's ear, however, you can learn how to manage a fly rod with a fair amount of efficiency in an hour or so. If you pick up your first fly rod a little after lunch, you should be catching at least a few fish by late afternoon. Going with someone who knows how is by far the best way to learn.

The most popular bass and bream lures for the fly rod fishermen are small (or not so small) popping bugs. My own preference is for bugs that are not dished out quite so drastically as the traditional poppers, some of which are capable of imitating the pop of a champagne cork when twitched too energetically on the surface of the water. I have caught bass on the big chugger, but I have also seen fish panic at the commotion. Bugs, like the Gaines Sneaky Pete, are much more sedate in the water, and they seem to arouse a fish's curiosity and feeding instinct without terrifying everything in the shallows

Size matters. A bluegill will hit a large popper, but it will rarely be able to take the hook into its mouth. Bass, on the other hand, will sometimes ignore even the most seductively worked offering if it looks too small to provide a square meal. Obviously, if one is interested in concentrating on either bream or bass, the choice is easy. For an evening of fun catching both, however, I would go with the smaller offerings. It will almost always produce some keeping-size bass, and the bream will fight each other to get to it.

Fly manufacturers make a variety of streamers as well as floating and subsurface lures and popping bugs for the warmwater fishermen. Rubber crickets and spiders are especially popular for bream. One of the most effective subsurface lures for small panfish is one that is virtually free. I was fishing in northern Pittsylvania County once when the big bluegills simply would not hit anything on the surface. There were plenty of small fish willing to come to lunch, but no big ones. A fishing companion cut a half-inch piece off the tail of a purple worm, split it, and stuck a #10 hook through one end of the piece of purple plastic. Almost immediately he began catching big bream with this piece of tackle box refuse two feet below the rubber spider I was artfully crawling across the surface. Later I modified his purple worm idea by piercing the body in two places with a large sewing needle and inserting pieces of rubber bands for legs. Or maybe antennae. Who knows? The resulting lure looks like . . . well, it doesn't look very much like anything at all, but bream will hit it when they won't hit any of my more sophisticated poppers.

The largest bass I have ever taken on a fly rod was not impressive by other standards. It weighed a little over three pounds. But a three-pound fish on a fly rod is Christmas and your birthday and the Fourth of July all at once. Even a one-pounder will jump like a first-round draft choice in the NBA and try to tie your willowy rod in an overhand knot. Big bream are even more impressive, in their own way. They turn sideways to the pressure of the line and make long, sawing runs parallel to the boat or bank. If you think bream are fish for kids, you have only to buy or borrow an inexpensive fly rod and a handful of small poppers to learn the truth. Bream and bass rarely throw a hook after they have taken a popping bug; the constant pressure is too light to enlarge the hole and admit any slack in the line. Most fish that break off do so by heading for the bottom or for heavy cover and fouling the leader.

I can catch more fish most of the time on live bait than I can with the fly rod. I can catch bigger bass nearly all the time on spinners or plastic worms. But there are times in the evenings in early summer when a fly rod in the right hands is as efficient as anything short of dynamite or a trammel net for catching very satisfactory fish, and for pure enjoyment it can't be beaten.

But even if the fish don't cooperate (sometimes they don't, even in June), the sun low on the dark water and the sounds of the frogs near shore and the deer or the muskrat or the beaver or the wood ducks that you might see are more than enough reason to push the boat into the water, take the oars, and lift your arm for the first back cast. The rod whips steadily overhead, the line shoots out a little more of itself each time, as you concentrate on a piece of shoreline cover or the dark shadow of a submerged stump. You lay the popper on the water as if it were a piece of down from one of the nearby cattails. The ripples die. You twitch it once, twice, and watch the water. Then there is something more than a swirl and more angry than a splash where the popper was, and you set the hook. The fish will not be a "hawg," as the bass pros say, but it will give a good account of itself there in the growing darkness near the edge of the lake. □

Stephen C. Ausband is the chairman of the English Department of Averett College in Danville, and is a frequent contributor to Virginia Wildlife.

WILDFIRE!

photo by Dave Coffman

Fires destroy wildlife habitat, but they also have a curious way of paving the way for new habitat

by Rick Preve

Opposite: *photo by Rick Preve*

Ah! The sounds, the smells, the sights of spring. A ruffed grouse drumming on a hollow log, the love calls of wild turkeys echoing in the mountain valleys. Sweet scents of dogwood blooms and serviceberry blossoms. The purple of redbud flowers and light-green leaves of alder bushes, the leaping orange flames and thick gray smoke of ravaging forest fires . . .

Ravaging forest fires? Where does that fit in with spring? Well, spring is also forest fire season in Virginia. The dry leaves left from fall on the forest floor have not yet been decomposed by soil microorganisms, and there isn't enough green on the tree branches to smother the flames of a fire. John Graff, Chief of Fire Management for the Virginia Department of Forestry in Charlottesville, explains: "Our spring fire season generally runs from late February to early May, although last year's drought extended it well into August."

Most Virginians are well acquainted with Smokey the Bear and his message: "Only you can prevent forest fires." No one doubts that Smokey has done his statistical homework: the majority of Virginia's forest fires are caused by human activities, with about 20 percent attributed to arson. But fires are also a natural phenomenon, and a necessity in many ecosystems. They can both destroy and create.

Fires can have a devastating effect on the fauna of a forest. While usually only the largest fires kill large animals, fires can move very rapidly and are extremely dangerous to anyone caught in front of them, particularly in steep terrain or under windy conditions. And when forest fires occur during the nesting season of ground-nesting birds such as quail, grouse, or wild turkey, they can do serious damage to populations. Studies done in the late 1960s on the ruffed grouse, for example, showed that fires occurring before egg-laying began in April had no effect on nesting success, but mid-April fires destroyed clutches and May fires killed chicks. Additionally, it has been shown that the loss of nesting cover resulting from forest fires makes it more likely for a

late cold spell or rain to kill quail chicks.

Forest fires are also damaging to bird and animal species that feed or live in the forest canopy, or to those that require mature forests as habitat. Squirrel populations, for obvious reasons, don't do well where all the acorn- or nut-producing trees have been reduced to charred skeletons. Yet, animals and birds can in turn influence the frequency and severity of forest fires. Insignificant as it may seem, studies have shown that leafy squirrel nests, the discarded shells of cracked acorns or the scales of pine cones, and even the tiny shavings made by nesting woodpeckers can increase the flammability of trees and contribute to the likelihood of lightning fires. Conversely, grazing by herbivores such as deer or domestic cattle can reduce the amount of ground fuel available to a forest fire, and their travel paths can act as natural firebreaks.

The threat from forest fires is not just limited to birds and animals. Fish populations, and particularly coldwater salmonids, such as brook or rainbow trout, can also suffer from the indirect effects of forest fires. Fires tend to raise water temperatures because they remove the forest canopy that shades and cools the water. Loss of cover can also lead to increased erosion and siltation once the rains come.

But the effects of even the most severe forest fires are eventually dampened over time. A ruffed grouse population that was drastically diminished by a May 1968 fire, for example, had returned to near-normal levels by the summer of 1969.

And fires can have positive effects on wildlife populations. They are needed to maintain quail habitat, since the bobwhite cannot live in dense forests and disappears as the canopy closes. Wild turkey habitat is similarly enhanced by periodic burning if it occurs outside the nesting season. Burned areas tend to warm up and have earlier snowmelt in the spring because the dark, bare ground warms

Firefighting is an expensive operation, requiring training, equipment, and men; photo by Rick Preve.

up faster than in unburned areas. This and the high nutrient content of the ashes results in earlier and more vigorous grass and weed growth, which in turn provides better food and cover to grouse and quail. The resulting higher insect populations assure a steady food supply for the nestlings, and also attract other bird species including flycatchers, swallows, wood pewees, phoebes, and purple martins. Where the fire leaves a mosaic of burned and unburned patches, studies have shown an increased presence of white-crowned sparrows, towhees, robins, warbling vireos, and thrushes. Jerry Sims, a Game Commission forester, explains his work with prescribed fires as a wildlife management tool: "The primary purpose of our burning program, which takes place in the winter, is to keep wildlife openings open. This allows for the maintenance of small game habitat, in particular rabbit and quail. We do this across all physiographic regions of Virginia, from the mountains to the Coastal Plain, and have done so for a number of years. At the White Oak Mountain Wildlife Area in Pittsylvania County, for example, we have burned an average of 200 acres every three years for the last 20 years."

Among the flora of our forest there is a wide range of adaptations to fire. Some species are highly susceptible to being killed by forest fires. For example, yellow birch *(Betula alleghaniensis)* and American beech *(Fagus grandifolia)* both have a thin bark and shallow rooting system and are very vulnerable to fire injury. The presence of either of these two species in a forest serves as an indicator that fire has been absent for some time.

At the other end of the fire-adaptation spectrum are species such as the southern yellow pines (loblolly, shortleaf, Virginia, and others) which are dependent on periodic forest fires for their survival in a forest ecosystem. Periodic burns release these southern yellow pines from competiton by killing the more fire-susceptible hardwoods. Hot-burning forest fires also prepare the ground for further pine regeneration by burning the leaf layer and exposing the mineral soil. Many pine species, in fact, will only open the scales of their cones and release their seeds under very high temperatures such as those produced by forest fires.

". . . the effects of even the most severe forest fires are eventually dampened over time."

photo by Rick Preve

Other tree species show somewhat intermediate levels of fire tolerance. Among the hardwoods, oaks are relatively more tolerant of fire damage than other trees. Yet even within this genus there are differences. Scarlet oak *(Quercus coccinea)*, for example, often grows in dry, rocky soils in association with chestnut oak *(Quercus prinus)*. Yet it is more susceptible to fire damage than the chestnut oak, and when fire sweeps through a forest stand containing these two species, the scarlet oak is more likely to show some damage. The damage is often in the form of a bark wound at the base of the tree, which swells over a number of years as the weight of the trunk slowly sinks into the rotting butt. Species such as red maple *(Acer rubrum)* or flowering dogwood *(Cornus florida)* are easily killed by fires, yet they may become more abundant because they sprout prolifically after a burn. Since their young shoots are a preferred wildlife food, they provide another example of a beneficial effect of fire on wildlife habitat.

Let me not dissuade you from following Smokey the Bear's advice. Fires are dangerous to life and property, to certain species of plants and animals, and can cause significant ecological damage through the loss of plant cover and increased soil erosion. "We lose each year the smallest percentage of forest than any other state in the South, primarily because of our strict fire laws and enforcement," says Graff. "Last year, for example, over 600 people were prosecuted for starting a wildfire or burning trash in an unlawful manner. But people are still careless and the threat to our forest resource is very real."

Yet forest fires are a natural occurrence in many forested areas and hold, in fact, the promise of life and renewal for species such as the longleaf pine. Although perhaps not as benign as the melting of snow, they too are a part of our spring. □

Rick Preve is a forester and president of National Resources Consultants, Inc. in Batesville.

A Sporting History:

by Stephen C. Ausband
photos by Cindie Brunner

Pittsylvania County sprawls from the low mountains of its northern border with Bedford County to the gentle hill country along the North Carolina line. At just over 1,000 square miles, it is the largest county in Virginia, and one of the most rural. Pittsylvania is tobacco country, with small, neat farms and old log buildings set off by wooded hillsides along the edges of streams. Viewed from the air in summer, it looks like an old-fashioned patchwork quilt, with the bright, shimmering green of wheat fields and the darker green of corn and tobacco, and the red-brown farm roads winding among the fields and alongside the dark, irregular patches of hardwoods and pines. You see some fairly large tracts of forest—paper company holdings or parts of the White Oak Moun-

Right: *Rob Sheets' farm in Pittsylvania County.*

Pittsylvania County

tain Wildlife Management Area—but mostly your eye is caught by the patchwork quilt variety of small farms and woodlots. There are a couple of big reservoirs, Smith Mountain and Leesville in the north, and a major river, the Dan, marking off the southern edge. It looks like good territory for fish and wildlife, and so for fishermen and hunters. It is too, but the fishing and hunting here, like that in much of the rest of Virginia, has changed over the last three decades.

If you ask someone in Pittsylvania County how he did last hunting season, he might tell you, "not very well," or "I just got one." Or he might just grin at you with an air of smug self-satisfaction and say, "pretty good"—meaning, of course, that he had gotten his limit. We're talking deer here, folks, because that is what more and more hunters in this part of the state think about when they think about hunting season. Oh, there are bird hunters and waterfowlers and rabbit-and-squirrel hunters, but the animal that seems to get all the attention these days is the whitetail deer. It hasn't always been this way, however, according to a couple of county residents who have watched the county change.

Rob Sheets came home to the Mountain Hill community, just outside Danville, after World War II. He bought a pack of fox hounds and spent a lot of time hunting on his family's farm and, a little later, on an adjacent farm of his own. There were plenty of foxes then, along with small game like quail, rabbits, and squirrels. "We had some fine fox hunting in those days," Sheets said. "The chases could go on all night long. Man, that was some music." There seemed to have been many more rabbits then, too. "Almost everybody rabbit hunted."

A few flocks of turkeys made their homes along the Dan River bottoms and on steep hills such as the one locally called Sheets' Mountain. Both

"People used to get excited if they just heard about a deer being seen in the neighborhood. They would talk about it for days."—Rob Sheets, Pittsylvania County.

Rob and his father killed turkeys with the same old Winchester Model 12 that Rob still uses. There were very few deer in the area—certainly there was no deer population large enough to sustain hunting—until Kerr Reservoir was impounded in the early 1950s, pushing deer from neighboring Halifax and Mecklenburg counties westward into Pittsylvania.

"People used to get excited if they just heard about a deer being seen in the neighborhood," Sheets said. "They would talk about it for days. And even seeing tracks was unusual. Then when they started building dams like the one down at Buggs Island, it pushed the deer out of those river bottoms and they started coming into this area." (At about the same time, of course, the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries began stocking deer from other locations, and deer populations all over the state were just beginning to make their dramatic comeback.)

Whatever effect the impoundment of Kerr Reservoir, or Buggs Island Lake, had on the hunting scene, the changes wrought on sport fishing were even more visible. As a teenager, Sheets gigged eels at the confluence of Cane Creek and the Dan River. A minnow seine would often turn up dozens of small eels, and large ones "as thick as your wrist" could be taken at night with a hook and line or a gig. "A lot of times when we were fishing for catfish we would wind up with these big eels instead.

"Another fish we used to catch years ago in the river was what we called the leather-back carp. It had scales on its belly and about halfway up its back, but no scales on top. I haven't heard of one in years. We'd catch walleye, too. Not many people know there are walleyes in the river, but there are. They still make a run around late January or February. There are raccoon perch in the river. Nobody much fishes for them anymore, but you can still catch them."

Striped bass were in the Dan River before there was a Buggs Island Lake, but were so unusual 40 years ago that when Sheets' father caught one, none of the neighbors could identify it. The dam at Buggs Island stopped the migrating eels, of course, and it was expected to stop the striped bass as well. The stripers, however made a radical adjustment, foraging in the huge lake as they once had in the ocean, and running up the Dan and Staunton rivers in the spring to spawn. Today when people think of fishing in the Dan River, they think primarily of the tremendously popular striped bass fishery in April and May. At other times of the year, the river's potential is largely ignored. There are still plenty of fish in the river, Rob claims ("bass, bream, crappie, and catfish—almost whatever you want"), but the striper has captured the imagination of most fishermen to such an extent that they pay little attention to the river except during the spring run. Many Pittsylvania fishermen trailer boats to Buggs Island or to Smith Mountain, the latter of which has cold water species like smallmouth bass and muskellunge as well as stripers and largemouth bass.

Robert Noel Amos has hunted in the county for most of his 83 years. Born in Franklin County, Mr. Amos moved to the Whitmell area when he was nine years old. Like Rob Sheets, he credits the two impoundments (Smith Mountain Lake and Kerr Reservoir) with having moved deer populations into the area. "I never killed a deer around here until I was nearly 70. Some people were deer hunting a lot then, but I hadn't done much of it in this area. The first one was a nice deer, a six-pointer, that I got with a shotgun just a little while after they put me on the stand."

Turkeys were here all along, according to Amos, and while he was never an avid turkey hunter, his father killed some enormous birds in the western part of the county. "My father once killed a turkey with a fourteen and a half inch beard," he said. "It was the biggest turkey I've ever seen."

Small game, he says, was once more numerous, but something—perhaps pesticides, perhaps farming practices that leave little cover for small game near the edges of fields—thinned out the rabbits and quail. "I used to go hunting rabbits, and even without a dog I might kill five or six," he says. "Now three or four hunters working a

pack of dogs all day long will be lucky to get six rabbits." He did a little fox hunting, and he remembers "Dr. Henry Pritchett and the Parrish boys" introducing red foxes for their dogs to run.

It is quail which have adapted and changed the most, Mr. Amos says. No longer do they frequent a farmer's open fields. Rather, they are feeding close to thick cover and are given to lighting in trees to escape danger. They have nearly turned into woodland birds.

"I never kept any bird dogs when I was young," he says, "but I had a little half-fyce hound that would hunt quail, once he figured out quail was what you wanted to hunt. He'd hunt other things too, of course, and I never could get him to point, but he'd find the coveys."

Finding the coveys now is only half the problem. "The birds are so wild. They get up way ahead of you, and then fly off and light in a tree. It's not the way bird hunting used to be." Until very recently Mr. Amos hunted both quail and rabbits with friends and relatives who kept dogs, but his knees won't allow him to walk the way he once did.

Like many other county residents, Mr. Amos is now a deer hunter. He was past retirement age when he began deer hunting, and he has seen the deer population increase from a handful of animals to a valuable and stable resource. He can't climb around in trees now, he explains, and so he prefers to do his hunting from stands on the ground. Nonetheless, he kills his share of deer. (The first time I saw him, he was sitting on a stool beneath an oak tree at the edge of a field near Gretna. There was a platform in the branches high above him, but I understood immediately that the old gentleman had no intention of climbing that tree. I waved as I passed his "stand" on the way to my own. I did not see a buck that day, but Mr. Amos did. The guys who helped him load it onto the pickup said it was a very nice deer.)

Pittsylvania County is in many ways typical of the changing environment to which both hunters and game have had to adapt. Turkeys, which once demanded huge, unbroken tracts of hardwoods, seem now to have found a way of living with the predominant mix of hardwood and pine. Quail have become creatures of thickets as much as of fields, and have taken to lighting in trees. Wood ducks are back, but rabbits are down. In the big impoundments, people in expensive and powerful boats fish for bass and stripers, and the striper run in the Dan brings out a flotilla of unlikely-looking crafts as well as an army of shorebound anglers. Beaver ponds, once a rarity, provide resting places for wintering mallards and blacks, as well as nesting sites for woodies. Groundhogs, formerly seldom seen far from cool mountain meadows, now eat soybeans along the Dan River bottomlands—to the delight of varmint hunters and the dismay of some farmers. And the deer are everywhere.

William Byrd, who surveyed the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina and passed through the area that is now southern Pittsylvania County in 1729, would not recognize that landscape now. The vast hardwood forests have largely given way to farmland, with woodlots of pine and hardwoods growing along the creek bottoms beyond the edges of the fields. The Dan River, too, which Byrd crossed near what is now the Highway 62 bridge, is no longer the clear, cold stream he described. Nothing will bring back the world Byrd saw.

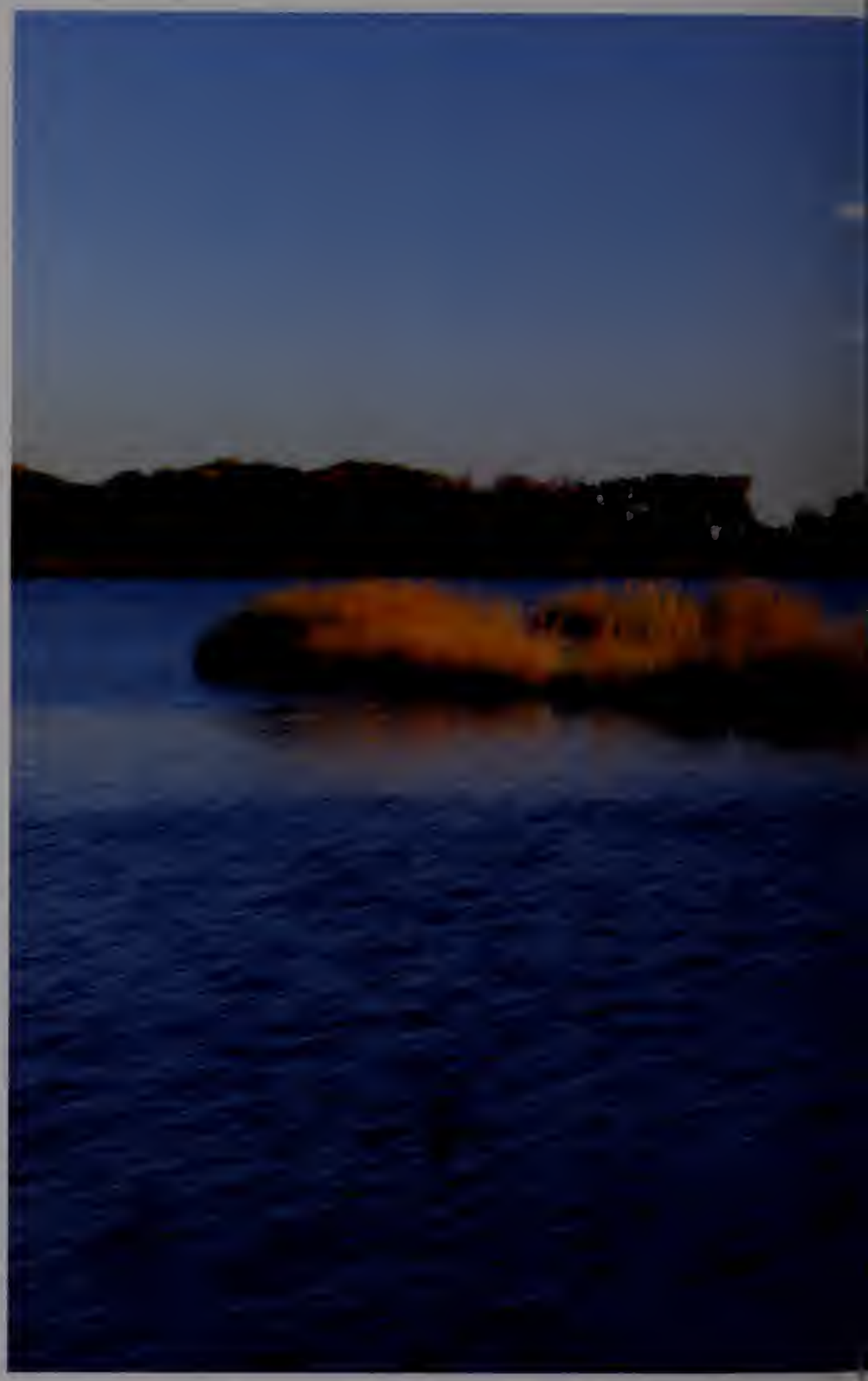
Modern game management, changing farm practices, dam construction, and the introduction of new species have all had an impact on hunting and fishing in the area; the environment has been anything but static, even in the last half of the 20th century. But it is at least refreshing to know that opportunties for people who enjoy the outdoors are still plentiful in Pittsylvania County.

One's first impression flying over the county in a small airplane is correct: it is good territory for fish and wildlife. Perhaps Rob Sheets said it best: "I don't need to travel around much. I can do just about anything I want to do right around home." □

Stephen C. Ausband is the chairman of the English Department of Averett College in Danville, and is a frequent contributor to Virginia Wildlife.

"I used to go hunting rabbits, and even without a dog I might kill five or six. Now, three or four hunters working a pack of dogs all day long will be lucky to get six rabbits."—83-year-old Robert Amos, Pittsylvania County.

VIRGINIA'S STREAMS



If you call yourself a Virginian, then you live close to water—either ocean, tidal water, Piedmont river, or mountain creek. Naturally we love our own waters best, but the authors take us beyond our own creeks into other waters. Read on:

People of the Alternating Streams

by Curtis Badger

Members of the great Powhatan nation called their members who lived along the river east of what is now Fredericksburg, *Rappahannocks*—"People of the Alternating Stream." The alternating stream—the rising and falling of the tides—was part of the rhythm of life in coastal Virginia. The low tide uncovered great shoals of oysters that grew

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in the river; high tide brought in nourishment of the oysters, as well as fish from deeper waters. The flow of the tides was like the flow of life—one of the great mysterious gifts of nature.

And for those of us who fish the rivers, streams, and creeks of eastern Virginia, the rhythm of the tides still sets the tempo of our sport.

Consider this: You could stand in the middle of the town of Mathews, draw a 60-mile radius around you, and within that circle would fall the finest sport fishing available on the East Coast. Your 60-mile radius would include some of the most productive largemouth bass waters in the South. It would include the tidal Potomac, the Rappahannock from near Port Royal downriver, the Mattaponi, Pamunkey, and the York rivers, the James from the fall line eastward, the Blackwater, Nottoway, and Meherrin rivers in southeast Virginia, Lake Drummond in the Dismal Swamp, and Back Bay. As your 60-mile radius arcs eastward, it would include the Virginia portion of the Chesapeake Bay, the seaside Eastern Shore from Chincoteague to Cape Charles, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, plus enough of the Atlantic Ocean to encompass the great marlin and tuna fishery that has attracted anglers to coastal ports for years.

With such a rich and varied fishery available right here in eastern Virginia, I've never understood why people spend mega-bucks to go fishing in Alaska, Canada, the Florida Keys, and other exotic locations romanticized in the outdoor magazines. Perhaps it's the

A great "alternating stream," the tidal Rappahannock River at Point Creek; photo by Bill Portlock.

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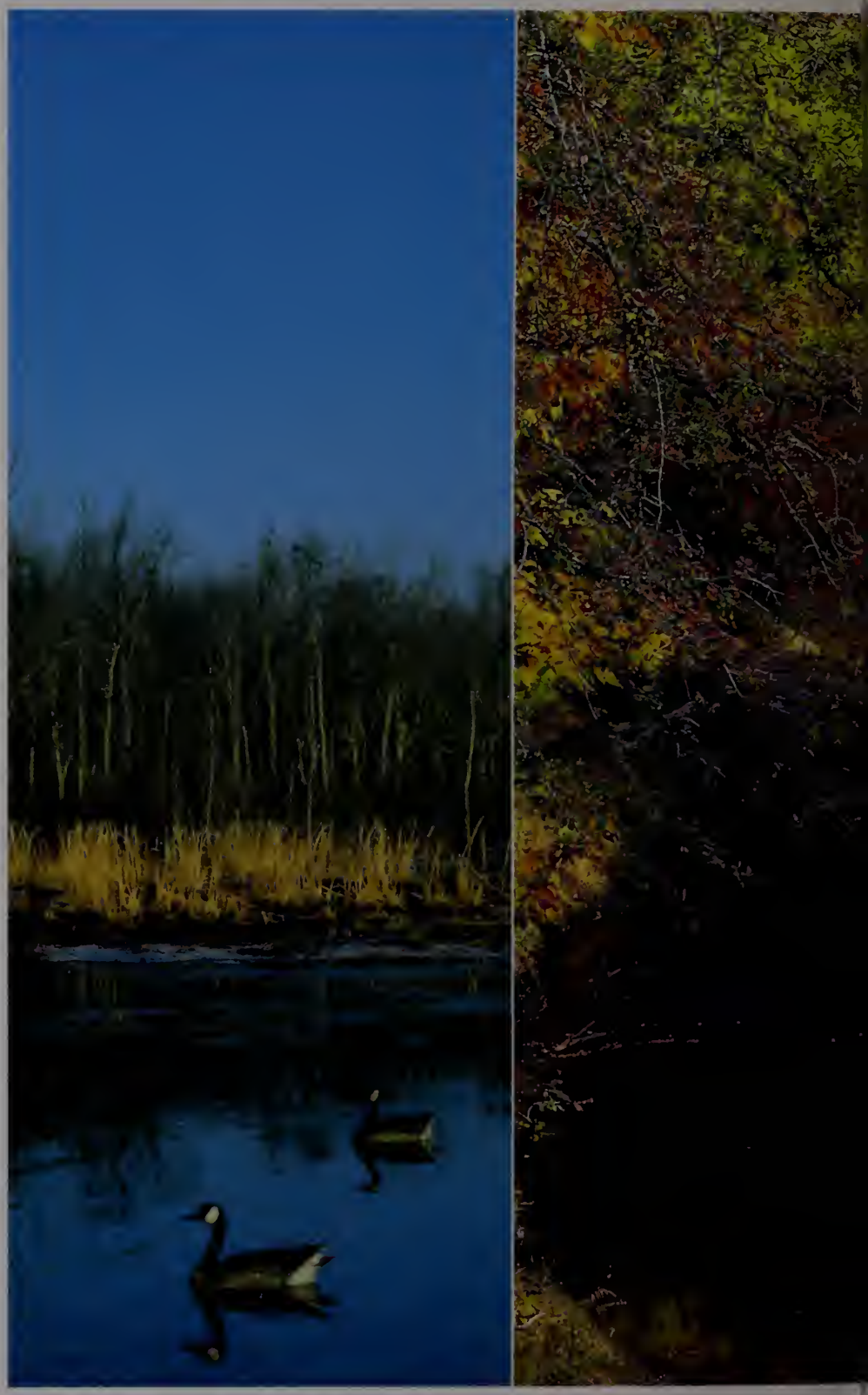
old "grass-is-greener" concept at work. Personally, I've always thought that Virginia's grass was of the brightest green.

A brief article can hardly do justice to a fishery of such a broad scope, even though the area covered is geographically limited. So we'll give you a general overview of the six major river basins or watersheds in eastern Virginia, leaving the nitty-gritty detail for consideration in more specific articles. The six basins include the Potomac, Rappahannock, York, James, Chowan, and the coastal system, which includes the Cheapeake shoreline and the seaside Eastern Shore.

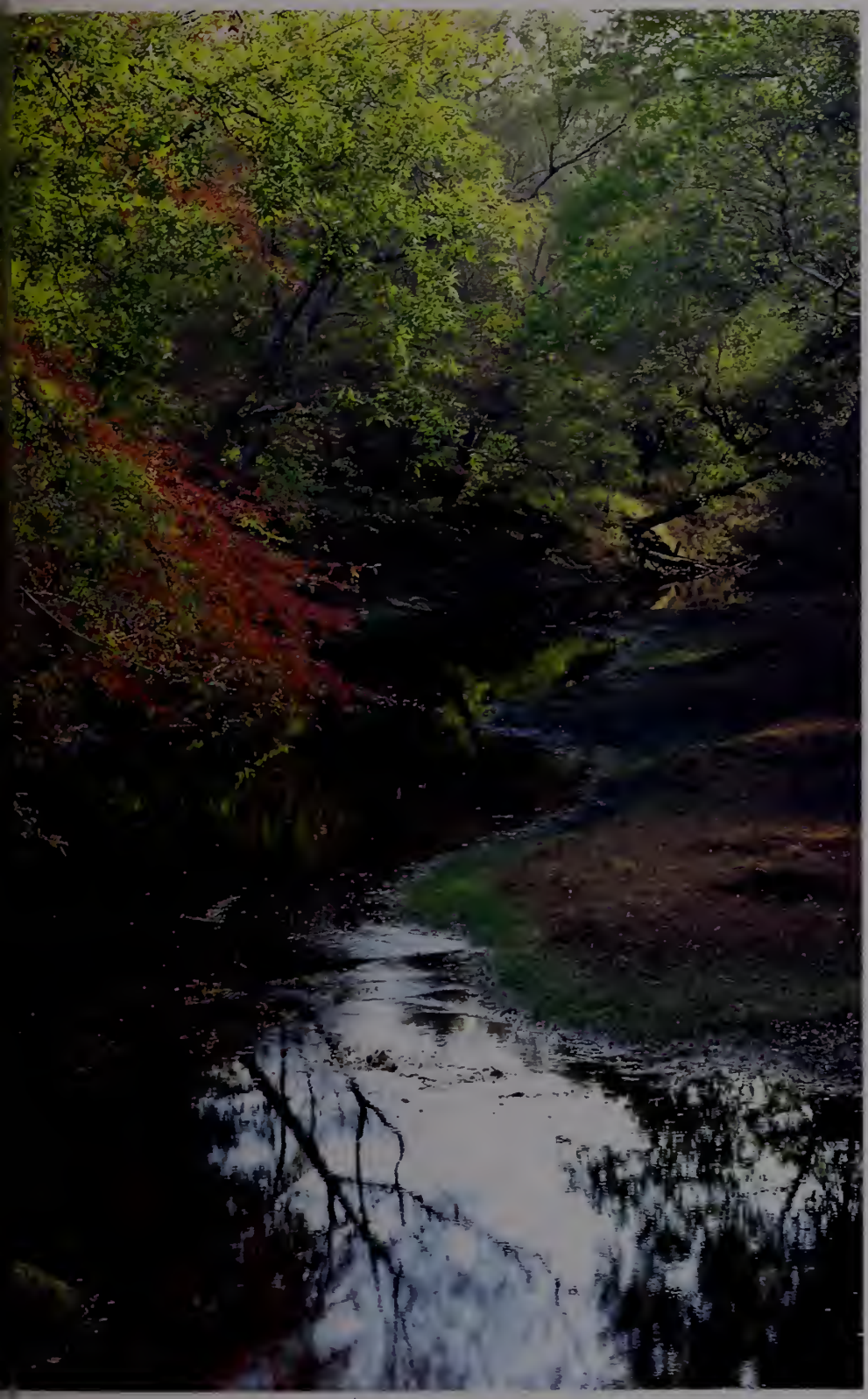
The Potomac begins in the mountains of Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia and meanders some 383 miles before emptying into the Chesapeake at Point Lookout. The Potomac was one of the first rivers in the mid-Atlantic area to be explored by Europeans; Spanish Admiral Pedro Menendez sailed upriver to what is now Stafford, 40 years prior to the explorations of Captain John Smith. It was Smith who named the Potomac in honor of an Algonquian village along the riverbank near what is now Washington, D.C.

The Potomac is better known nationally for its political currents than for its value as a fishing stream, which is a shame. Actually, about 94 percent of the river's basin is forest and farmland. Although the Potomac suffered greatly from rapid growth of the metropolitan Washington area over the last two centuries, President Lyndon Johnson's 1965 edict to make the Potomac a "model of beauty" is slowly bearing fruit. The upper river, where it forms the boundary between Virginia and Maryland, is a productive freshwater fishery, and the tidal Potomac yields



Right: *The Pamunkey River is known for its waterfowl hunting and its shad, herring, and perch spring runs; photo by Spike Knuth.*

EAST AND WEST



good catches of blues, croaker, spot, and the occasional flounder and trout.

South of the Potomac is another prime fishing river.

Chris Wade, a bass tournament regular from Fredericksburg, claims that the Rappahannock is one of the most underrated largemouth bass resources in the state. Wade, who writes an outdoor column for the *Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star* says the area of the river from Fredericksburg to 10 miles below Port Royal is ideal for largemouth. The feeder creeks between Port Royal and Tappahannock also yield bass, while the river proper several miles below Port Royal offers freshwater-saltwater transition fish such as catfish, spot, and striped bass.

The York River basin is formed by the merging of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers at West Point, 34 miles from the mouth of the river. The York is a deep tidal river with a rich tradition in American military history. At Yorktown during the American Revolution, Admiral de Grasse blocked Cornwallis's attempt to escape by sea and thus forced his surrender. Anglers today force the surrender of many fish from the York and its tributaries. In colonial times, Virginia's settlers could depend on the river for sturgeon, shad, spot, trout, and stripers. Today, the York is still a productive tidal fishery. The Mattaponi and the Pamunkey yield hickory shad, stripers, perch, and pickerel.

The James River basin is home to nearly one-third of Virginia's population, and the residential and commercial demands on the storied river are great. The James begins as a turbulent, kinetic mountain stream in western Virginia, but once it passes the fall line at Richmond it becomes a wide, lazy tidal river.

Left: *The Mattaponi River, which merges with the Pamunkey River to form the York River at West Point; photo by Bill Portlock.*

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The James suffered a crushing blow between 1966 and 1975 when the infamous Kepone contamination forced the closure of more than 100 miles of the river to fishing. For nine years, a chemical manufacturing plant in Hopewell dumped the insecticide into the river, severely contaminating aquatic life and river sediments. Commercial fishing restrictions are still in effect on the river.

Between Richmond and Jamestown the James is a freshwater river, and catfish and pickerel provide most of the sport. Nearer the mouths of the James, York, Rappahannock, and Potomac, the action features traditional saltwater gamefish: gray trout (weakfish), spot, croaker, and flounder. The Chickahominy, a tributary of the James, offers superb largemouth bass fishing, crappie, chain pickerel, and catfish. Bream provide a hot weather staple here.

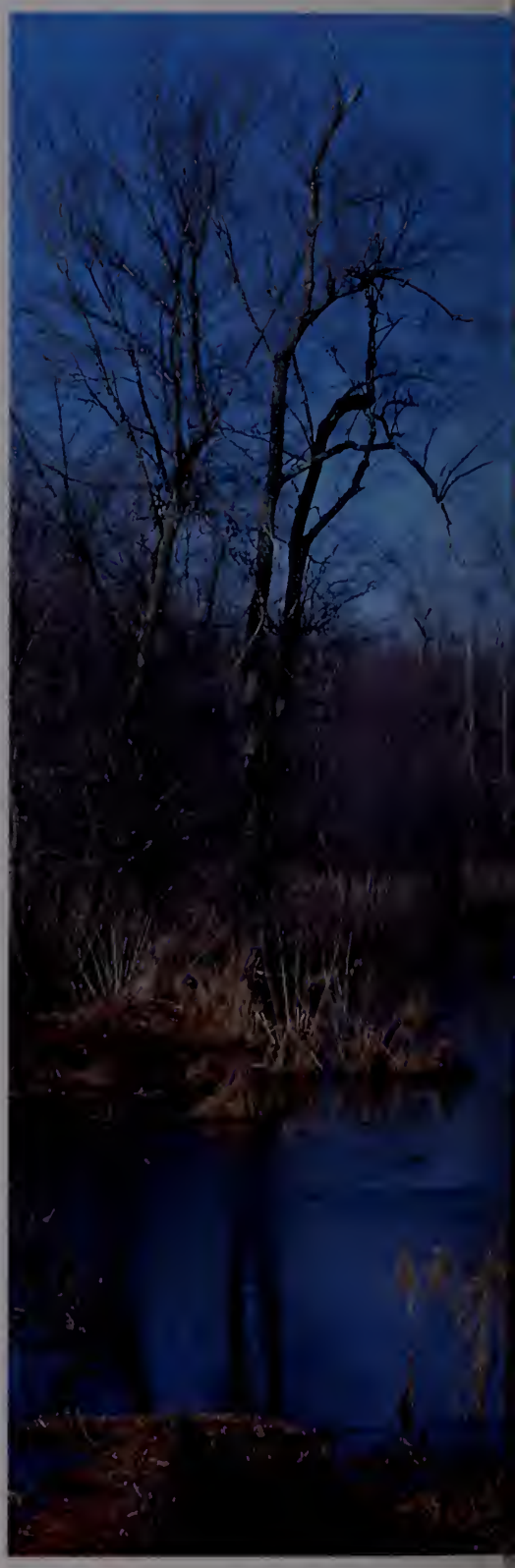
The Virginia waters of the Chesapeake Bay provide a great variety of fish. Bill Bonds of Jett's Hardware in Reedville says fishing in that area begins in mid-April with chopper bluefish in the 18- to 20-pound range. By late June, smaller blues move in, along with trout, spot, and croaker. Menhaden provide an important commercial fishery in the area, so it's not surprising that many recreational anglers use menhaden to create chum slicks to attract blues. Bottom jigging is the preferred method for taking trout, spot, and croaker. During the hot days of summer, fishing seems to be best late in the evening. Best baits include peeler crabs or soft crabs for trout and croaker, bloodworms for spot.

Dr. Ron Kiefer of Gloucester Point is a retired dentist who has written a book on fishing the York River environs. He currently works for a research company contracted by the National Marine Fisheries Service to provide a data base for saltwater sports fishing. In the course of his job, Dr. Kiefer talks to a lot of fishermen, and he spends several days a week researching with a rod and reel.

The most promising trend Dr. Kiefer spotted last summer is the return of the croaker. During the mid-1970s croakers gathered in the Chesapeake in mass, often gobbling bait before a preferred gray trout had a chance to seize it. A severe winter, among other factors, quickly devastated the population, and few fish have been caught in recent years. But Dr. Kiefer says the lower James, York, Rappahannock, and Potomac have healthy populations of ½-pound to 2-pound croaker this year.

The huge gray trout that thrilled anglers several years ago seems to be on the decline, but there is a bumper crop of pan-size trout. Flounder are fairly scarce, but late summer schools of spot provide lots of fun on light action tackle.

Fishing on the Eastern Shore is similar to that on the western boundary of the Chesapeake, but it is by no means a carbon copy. May is traditionally black drum month along Cape Charles, and when the big fish move in, anglers bait up with clams and head for the Cabbage Patch, the traditional drum fishing grounds off Cape Charles. Farther north in the bay, bottom fishing is concentrated along the deepwater holes or rocks, areas where there is structure of steep drop-offs. Productive areas include the Cell, Mud Hole, Ditchbank, Hacks' Rock, and Beach Rock.



This page: *The Chickahominy River, known for its largemouth bass fishery; photo by Spike Knuth.* ***Right:*** *the James River near Otter Creek; photo by Bill Portlock.* ***Far right:*** *York River; photo by Spike Knuth.*

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Late spring is the time to troll or cast for bluefish, speckled trout, and channel bass on the Eastern Shore bayside. Gray trout, croaker, and flounder show up a little later, and spot are available in late July through September. Peeler is the traditional bottom-fishing bait, although most fishermen have their personal favorites. Dr. Kiefer swears by a two-hook top and bottom rig with squid on the top hook and bloodworm on the bottom.

The seaside Eastern Shore is famous for its April and May flounder runs, and guides in Chincoteague, Wachapreague, Quinby, and Oyster have been chartering flounder parties for years. The inshore waters also yield trout, spot, seabass, and the occasional bluefish and croaker. The barrier islands offer exciting surf fishing action in spring and fall when channel bass move into the shallows to feed during their migrations. Big blues and trout are also taken frequently in the surf. Most of the islands are accessible only by boat, which offers the best fishing, but you can drive to Assateague Island National Seashore. Four-wheel drive vehicles are admitted in selected areas by permit, or you can park your non-beach-going car and walk to the surf.

Fishermen in eastern Virginia have much in common with the Rappahannocks—The People of the Alternating Stream. The movement of the tidal waters brought them the necessities of life, and hundreds of years later, we are still sharing that bounty. The twice-daily ebb and flow is a pulse felt by all of us who go to Virginia's tidal waters for recreation, relaxation, or escape. The rhythm of the tide is as ancient as time, but there also is a constant spirit of surprise, of never knowing what the next tide might bring. And it is this spirit that keeps us fishing. □

Curtis Badger is director of publications for the Wildlife Art Museum of the Ward Foundation in Maryland and is a frequent contributor to Virginia Wildlife.

VIRGINIA'S STREAMS

Streams of the Mountains

by Bruce Ingram

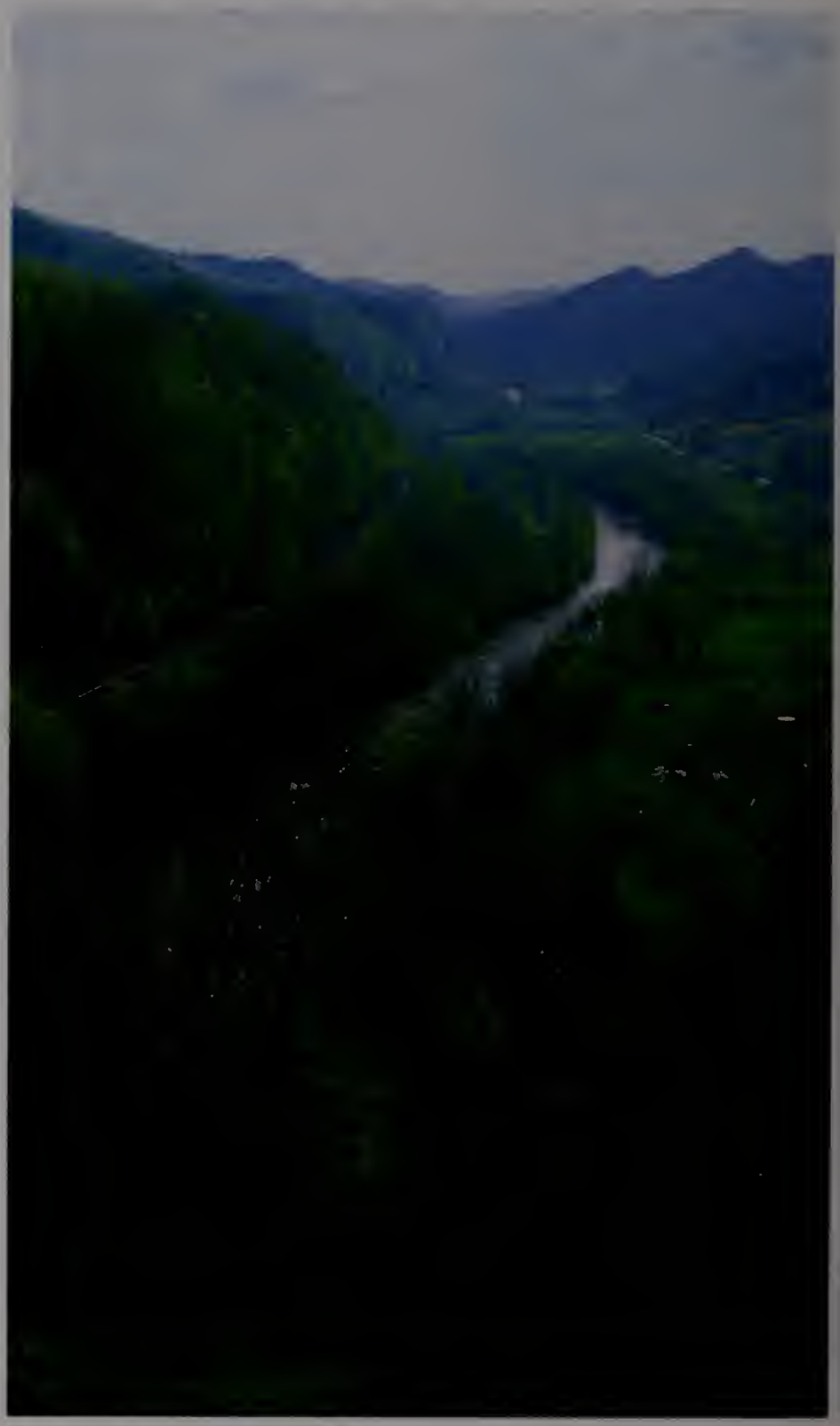
I have always lived in western Virginia and really can't imagine living anywhere else. Here in the valleys and mountains we know that to be awed means "filled with wonder, amazement, admiration and fascination." Thus, I can think of no better way to describe the rivers and creeks of this region than to say that they are truly awesome—in every sense of the word.

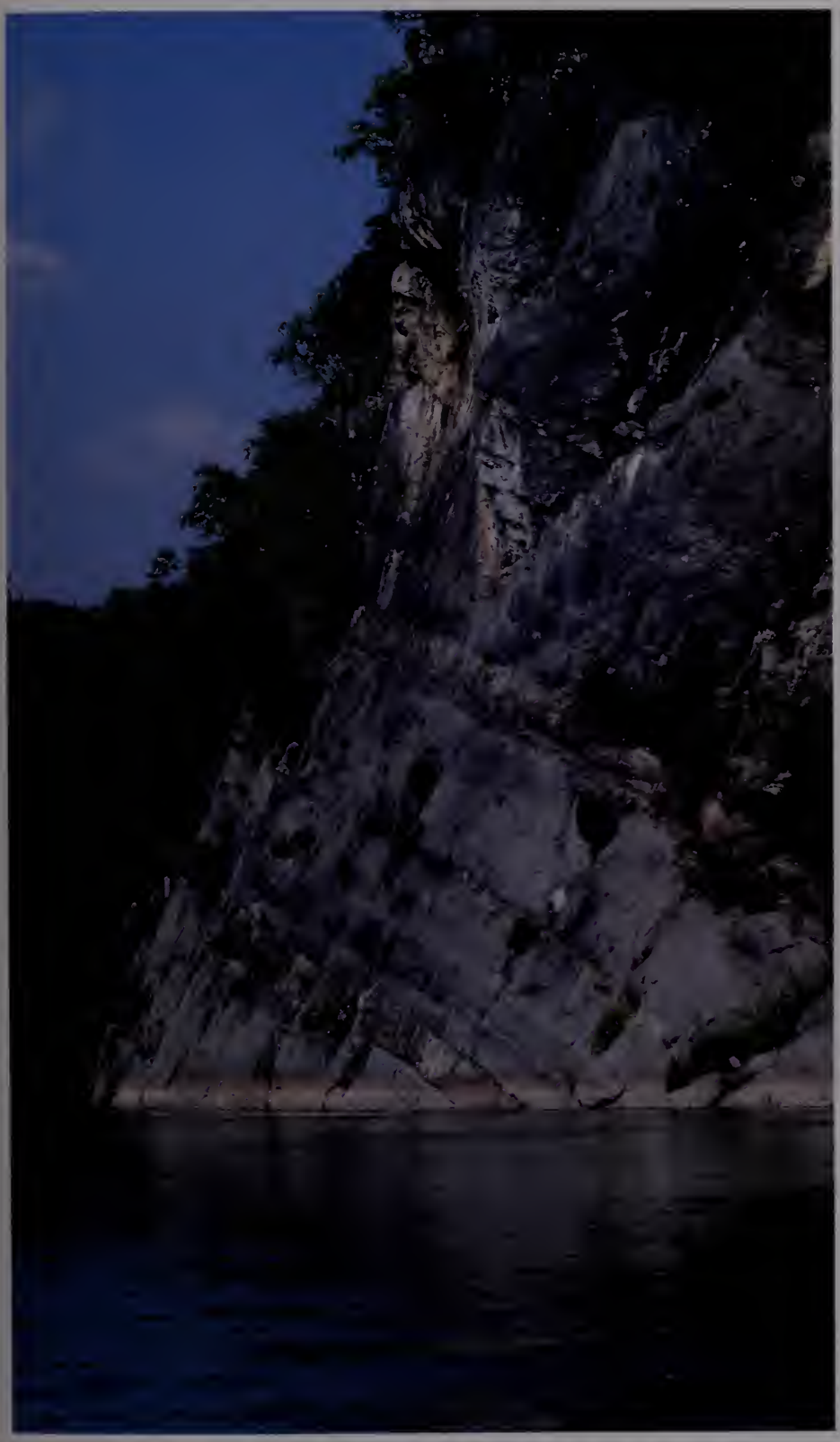
Any story on Virginia's streams has to include the upper James River. From its origin at Iron Gate, where the Cowpasture and Jackson Rivers come together to form it, to where it turns tidal below Richmond, the James ranks as the state's best fishery.

I have canoed and waded this river many times, yet the mere mention of a possible trip to it still thrills me. Smallmouth bass thrive in the river, and the James annually leads all state waters in the number of smallmouth citations produced. The upper James is also a muskie hot spot and contains good populations of rock bass and redbreast sunfish as well.

The New River ranks second only to the James. The New seems to be a little clearer, a little faster, and a bit more isolated than the James, though the stream receives its share of fishing pressure on weekends. The New originates in North Carolina, enters the Old Dominion near Mouth of Wilson, and runs north across southwestern Virginia on its way to West Virginia and eventually the Ohio River. Like the James, the stream conceals bronzebacks, muskies, redeyes and sunfish, but the New also coughs up spotted bass and walleyes.

In northwestern Virginia lies another classic stream, the Shenandoah and its two main tributaries—the North





and South Forks. The latter waterway probably has the best fishery of the three.

The South Fork quite likely has more mossybacks per mile than any other stream in the state, though the ones in the James and the New generally run larger. On my first visit to the river, my companion and I literally lost count of how many bass we caught—strong testament to what this stream can offer when at its best.

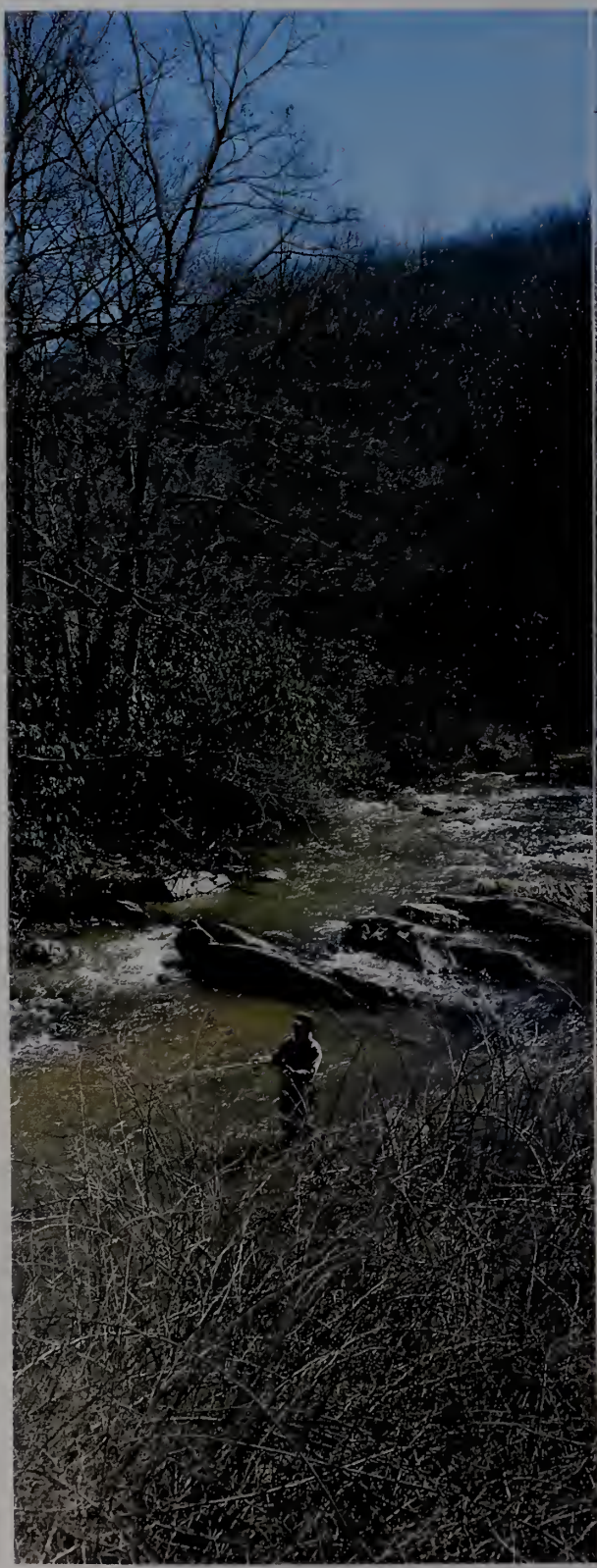
In north-central Virginia, the Rappahannock courses. Incredibly, this stream still retains its rural character even though Washington, D.C. is only an hour or so away and Fredericksburg sits on the river's banks. Some excellent smallmouths have been landed from the Rappahannock in recent years including a 6 pound, 14 ounce trophy in 1985. Anglers can expect serveral smallies in the 12- to 15-inch range during a typical outing.

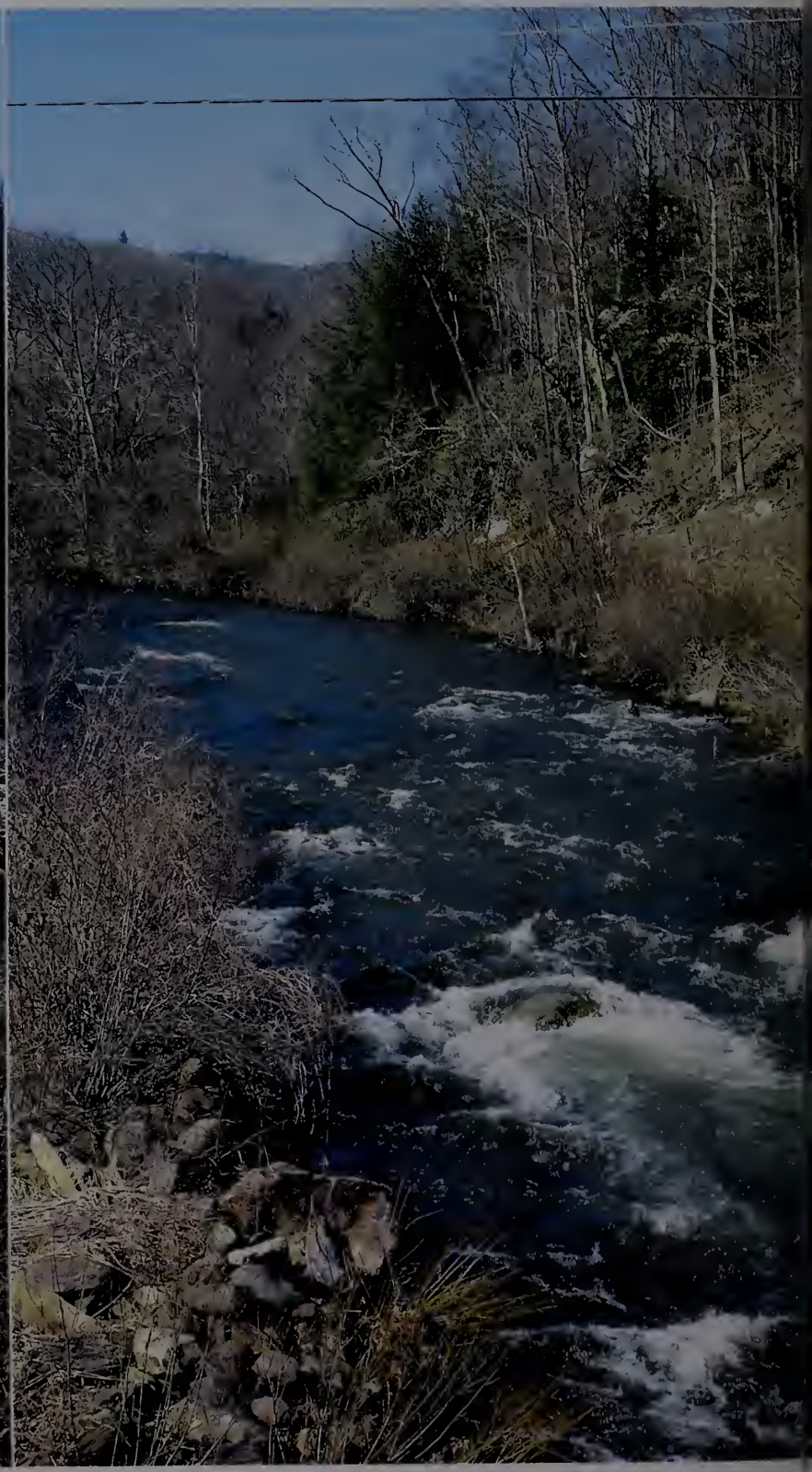
Though the James, New, Shenandoah, and Rappahannock could be called the "Big Four" for smallmouth bass action, there are many other superb waterways. In the far southwest, there are the Clinch and the South Fork of the Holston, a pair of jewels which are often overlooked and underpublicized. Two of the James' best tributaries are the Maury and the Tye, although these two rivers can become quite shallow in late summer with canoeing becoming difficult.

Central Virginia boasts two very underrated streams, the Appomattox and the South Anna, and people in northern Virginia know about the charms of the Rapidan, a major tributary of the Rappahannock. And no matter where you live in western Virginia, chances are that you have that most wonderful of creations—a creek near you. A creek, assuming that it's free flowing and unpolluted, brims

Far left: *The Clinch River; photo by Roy Edwards.* ***Left:*** *The Shenandoah River; photo by Lou Hinshelwood.*

VIRGINIA'S STREAMS





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Far left: *Crooked Creek, in Southwest Virginia, a prime trout fishery flowing into the New River; photo by Cindie Brunner.* ***Left:*** *The Upper New River; photo by Cindie Brunner.* ***This page:*** *Fishing on the South Anna River; photo by Bruce Ingram.*

with life of all kinds and is an exceptional place to wet a line for bass and panfish.

For those whose inclinations run toward wild trout, look no further than the Smith River near Martinsville. The Smith has been called the best brown trout stream in the South—and not without reason. The late 1970s saw the stream regularly give up state record browns and though those days are gone, at least for a while, the river remains a fine fishery. The streams in the Shenandoah National Park hold native brook trout and, of course, there are scores of stocked trout streams in western Virginia.

A good way to start an argument on any western Virginia river is to make definitive statements about which lures are best. A popular artificial on the James is the Tiny Torpedo, on the New it's a Jitterbug, and on the Shenandoah white jigs are often favored. Generally, if you cast minnow or crayfish imitations into eddies, current breaks, or pools formed by riffles, you will battle your share of fish. My favorite smallmouth lure is a gold Rapala, but an in-line spinner such as a Mepps will trigger strikes from just about any stream species.

This year, consider visiting some of the streams in western Virginia. Paddle by rhododendron thickets and stands of river birch and ironwood. Or wade under green canopies formed by sycamores. And if you feel just a little bit awed by the splendor of it all . . . well, I won't be surprised. □

Bruce Ingram is the Virginia editor for Outdoor Life *magazine and a frequent contributor to* Virginia Wildlife.

Lakes Smith and Whitehurst

Where fishing is good because the management has worked.

by Mitchell Norman

Nestled in the metropolitan area of Norfolk and Virginia Beach are two lakes which offer a prime example of a successful fisheries management program by the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. These lakes are owned by Norfolk and are part of the city's water supply system. Lake Smith is 222 acres and Lake Whitehurst is 458 acres.

These small lakes are no strangers to freshwater fishermen in Tidewater. For years the lakes have been known for the relatively high number of citation largemouth bass caught there. But in the not too distant past, this was the only noteworthy thing about fishing in these urban lakes. The angling for panfish left much to be desired. The problem was simply too many of them, and not enough for them to eat, resulting in slow growth and poor body condition. As one fisherman put it when complaining to me about the small size of bluegill in the lakes, "You can fish all day, catch a boat load of bream, and still not have enough for supper."

In response to anglers' requests to do something to improve fishing in Lakes Smith and Whitehurst, the Game Commission initiated a fairly comprehensive study of the lakes in 1970. Fish population sampling over the next several years showed a gross over-abundance of forage fishes and a definite shortage of predatory fishes in Lake Smith. In Lake Whitehurst, the fishery situation was in better shape but could still use some improvement. Various panfish (primarily bluegill, pumpkinseed, yellow perch and white perch as well as gizzard shad) were found to be stunted from over-abundance. Gizzard shad were so numerous that they accounted for as much as 90 percent of the total fish taken in sampling efforts. On the other hand, largemouth bass and chain pickerel were the only preda-

photo by Mitchell Norman

tory sport fish, and there weren't many of them.

In addition to the scarcity of largemouth bass, the bass fishery had the additional problem of being composed of mostly older fish. Although this may seem desirable for "big bass" anglers, this type of population structure simply does not make for good all-round fishing. First of all, big bass in small numbers means a low catch rate. Secondly, a predator fish population composed of a few big fish can't control forage fish populations. Rather, predatory fish of all sizes are needed to feed on prey fish of all sizes to maintain a well-balanced fishery. In Smith and Whitehurst, the panfish were controlling the bass population by preying on the bass eggs, fry and small fingerlings.

To bring the system back into balance and to increase growth rates for the panfish by reducing their numbers, the Game Commission initiated a predator fish stocking program on these lakes in 1974. This stocking program started with walleye, a voracious fish more common to northern waters. Walleye were first stocked on an experimental basis, since Lakes Smith and Whitehurst are not ideal habitat for this fish. Walleye was selected for stocking because of its feeding habits, its fast growth rate, and high angler appeal. Also, walleye was considered a wise choice since yellow perch, one of its favorite food items, was so abundant and stunted in these lakes.

These early stockings proved to be a great success, establishing fishable walleye populations in both lakes. Growth of the walleye in Smith and Whitehurst is considerably faster than that for northern walleye populations. In Smith and Whitehurst, walleye grow to an average length of 12 inches the first year, to 17 inches the second, to 19 inches the third, and to 21 inches the fourth. At about 20 inches, the walleye weigh around three pounds. With the citation size for walleye dropped to four pounds in 1984, we are seeing several citation walleye taken from these lakes.

To help control the gizzard shad population and also to provide a trophy fish for anglers, striped bass were stocked in the lakes from 1976 through

illustrations by Michael Simon

Walleye

Hybrid striper

Redbreast sunfish

Redbreast sunfish, hybrid stripers and walleye are just three species in Lakes Smith and Whitehurst that make for some fine angling in these Tidewater fishing holes.

1979. Unfortunately, not every venture can be a successful one. The striped bass stocking must be considered one of those failures, especially in Smith. Very few stripers were captured by biologists in fish population sampling or were known to have been creeled by anglers. The few stripers caught were taken from Lake Whitehurst, and mostly from the borrow pits near the airport.

The most likely explanation for this stocking failure is the high water temperatures of these shallow lakes during the summer months. Stripers must have a "cool refuge" to escape to. Thus, only a few stripers survived in Whitehurst and were caught in the borrow pits which are close to 40 feet deep. That depth does not exist in Lake Smith, which has a maximum depth of only eight to 10 feet.

With striped bass stocking a failure, we turned to the hybrid striped bass X white bass ("wiper" or "white rock") because it is known to be more warm water tolerant than striped bass. The hybrid was stocked first in Whitehurst in 1981 and in Smith the following year. Each lake has received annual stockings since that time. Much to the delight of anglers and biologists alike, these hybrid striped bass have taken to Lakes Smith and Whitehurst. With an abundance of gizzard shad to feed on, the hybrid stripers are growing fast in these Norfolk lakes. They reach the 15-inch creel size limit and one and a half pounds by the close of their second year. By age three, the fish are at least 20 inches long and weigh a little over four pounds.

Another success story is the stocking of channel catfish in the lakes. A predatory fish, channel cats were stocked annually in each lake from 1976 through 1979. The channel cats have shown good survival and growth and are even reproducing naturally in both lakes. The fact that they are reproducing is especially good news to Commission biologists, since it has allowed for the discontinuation of the costly stocking program. Given suitable spawning habitat as is present in these lakes, channel catfish can propagate themselves. And, channel catfish are another popular fish with Smith and Whitehurst anglers. Many people fish there specifically for channel cats, which seem to accept almost anything for bait.

You would think that stocking all of these predatory fish in these small lakes would have an impact on the overabundant, stunted panfish populations. You're right—it has. Fish population sampling by biologists in 1983 showed considerable improvement in the stunted panfish problem. Especially in Lake Smith where we had our worst problem, a length distribution of bluegill captured there in 1983 showed several fish of the seven-inch class and even a few as large as eight inches. When we began our study of these lakes in 1970, we could not find any Lake Smith bluegill larger than six inches. So the fisherman who could "fish all day, catch a boat load of bream and still not have enough for supper" can now catch enough for several meals in a day's fishing.

Some concerned bass fishermen might wonder if the stocking of all these predatory fishes has hurt the bass population in some way. Nope! The opposite is the case. Population sampling in 1983 documented far more successful bass spawning than any found in the early 1970s and showed a better structured population with numerous intermediate sized bass as well as several lunkers. In the early 1970s, practically all we had in the lakes were a few lunker bass, which were generally taken by the more experienced anglers. Now that bass are more abundant, catch rates are higher and even the novice angler catches a few.

So, try your luck in Lake Smith or Whitehurst sometime. It might turn out to be one of your better fishing trips. The city of Norfolk requires a permit for fishing or boating on its lakes in addition to a state fishing license. Annual permits can be purchased from the Norfolk Water Department. Daily permits are available at the Lake Smith Bait and Tackle Shop off Northampton Blvd., which provides boat and electric motor rentals, food and drinks, and bait and tackle. □

Mitchell Norman is a regional supervisor with the Commission's fish division.

Did You Know?

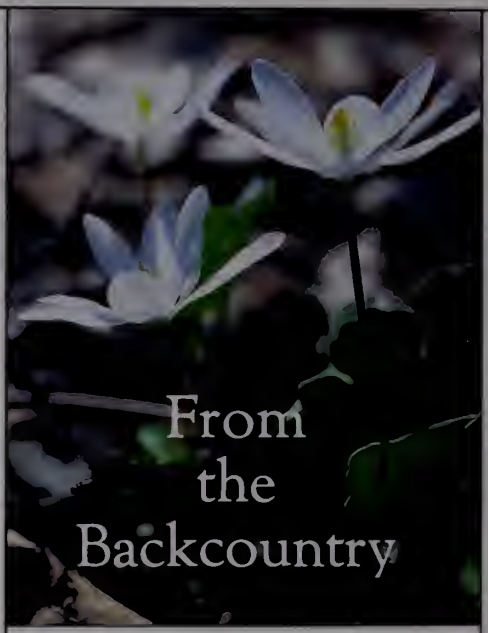
. . . That the Game Commission completed over 1,000 environmental impact reviews last year?

The Game Commission reviews every state and federal project which could affect the wildlife resource, including:

- U.S. Corps of Engineers permit applications
- U.S Fish and Wildlife planning documents
- Virginia Water Control Board permit applications
- Virginia Marine Resources Commission permit applications
- U.S Forest Service plans
- Virginia Department of Highways permit applications for state, local and private proposed activities

When a proposed project crosses our desk, we first review the documentation on the proposed activity. Then, we feed the location into our computerized fish and wildlife inventory data base (BOVA) to pinpoint what wildlife species occur at that location. At the same time, we send the proposal out to our biologists in the field and any other experts for their assessment. Finally we put together our professional and technical recommendation on the proposal.

Our environmental reviews impact such proposed projects as dams, reservoirs, ponds, lakes, bridges, tunnels, dredging, stream flow modifications, roads, housing developments, powerlines and mining. □



Courtesy Makes Boating Enjoyable

by Colonel Wiliam O. Antozzi

Summer is here and boaters are out in full force. As in many sports, everyone doesn't see eye to eye on how boating should be conducted. Fishermen pursue a rather quiet sport, whereas the speed boaters and water skiers make a lot of noise and wake. Fishermen are not too happy about the wake, especially when a fast moving vessel comes closer than seems necessary. Operators of sailboats, canoes, kayaks, and other slow moving boats are also irritated when a fast moving boat operator shows lack of consideration. A solution to this is for all boaters to respect the rights of others.

Too often, people operate boats without ever having learned the rules of the waterways. The first rule is, *be careful of your wake.* When passing another boat, slow down, whether the boat you pass is underway, anchored, or just drifting. The passengers in the other boat will respect your good judgement. Watch your wake in harbors, marinas, and other places where boats are tied up or anchored. Another rule is, *when meeting another boat head-on, steer to the right as if you were driving a car.* If a boat approaches from your right, it has the right of way; if from the left, you have the right of way. If a boat gives one blast on a whistle or horn, it means, "Pass on my port." If you hear two blasts, it means, "Pass on my starboard." Make sure you know port from starboard. It is sad, but most boaters do not.

Show consideration for others when at a launching ramp. Have your boat ready to slip off the trailer before you get it to the ramp. When pulling a boat out of the water, put it on the trailer quickly and get off the ramp as soon as possible while others are waiting. Pull the trailer to an out of the way spot and then do your final tying down and tidying up. Don't be a showoff. It is almost sure to result in an accident. That type of boatman impresses only himself and law enforcement officers.

Courtesy and common sense, if used, reduce boating accidents. □

Canoe Map Available

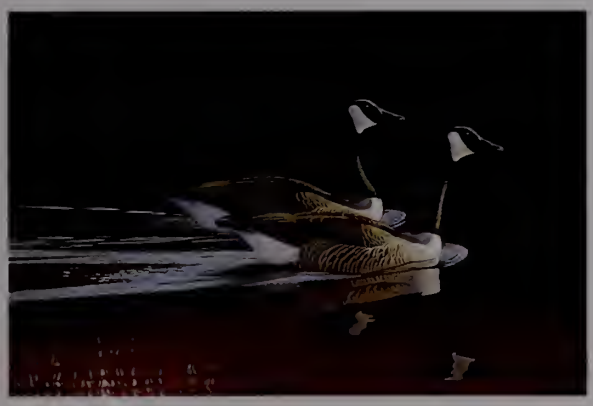
Reprints of the James River Canoe Map published in the April issue of *Virginia Wildlife* are available free of charge by writing to: Canoe Map, Education Division, Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA 23230-1104. □

Hunter Education Instructors Needed Statewide

Mandatory hunter education goes into effect on July 1, 1988, and the Game Commission needs help to educate new hunters. At least 300 new hunter education instructors will be needed to meet the demand for hunter education courses statewide and we are recruiting qualified men and women now to become certified by enrolling in our 16-hour instructor's course. Anyone interested in taking this course must have completed a Basic Student Hunter Safety Course, be at least 18 years of age, and have good character references.

For more information, contact Captain Herb Foster, Hunter Education Coordinator, Virginia Game Commission, P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA 23230-1104. □

Durant Ball Wins Best in Show at Mid-Atlantic Wildfowl Festival



Durant Ball of Newport News recently won the "Best in Show" award at the 1987 Mid-Atlantic Wildfowl Festival in Virginia Beach. Ball's entry, "Hidden Cove Canada Geese" rendered in oils,was selected from among 45 exhibiting wildlife artists.

Ball's artistic skills need no introduction to the Old Dominion, as his paintings have appeared on numerous *Virginia Wildlife* magazine covers. His many awards include: 1986 New Hampshire Duck Stamp; 1985 New Hampshire Pheasant Stamp; 1985 North Carolina Wildlife Federation "Print of the Year;" 1984 front cover of Bowhunter Magazine; 1983 and 1982 National Wildlife Federation Conservation Stamps; and 1980 National Wild Turkey Federation Christmas card. His painting "Water's Edge Tundra Swans" was selected to be displayed with the works of the world's best bird artists by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wasau, Wisconsin, for their Tenth Annual "Birds in Art" Exhibition, 1985. □

Pick Up The Phone

Since legal hunting seasons have ended, calls to the wildlife violations hotline, 1-800-237-5712 have slowed. Perhaps this is because citizens may think hunting season is the only time violations of the state's game laws occur. That's not true, violations are continuous, especially by the outdoor outlaws who think law enforcement efforts slow down in the off season.

Calls to the hotline will bring results anytime. Now that fishing season is gearing up, anglers who observe fishing violations can do their part in preserving the balance of the fisheries by alerting the Commission to those who take more than their fair share or who are catching illegal species.

Callers to the hotline do not have to identify themselves, but may be eligible for a reward based on the seriousness of the violation they report. Information from every call is turned over immediately to game wardens who investigate the complaint. Cases brought as a result of previous calls to the hotline are now pending in some courts. Callers may make contact to the hotline 24 hours a day, just dial 1-800-237-5712. □

That New Boat

by Peter Blaidsell

Spring is the time when the thoughts of boaters turn to pleasant days on the water and to that new boat. The Virginia Game Commission wants to make sure the pleasant dreams become realities and stay that way. Here are a few tips that will help make them so.

Boats built for recreational use must be built to Coast Guard standards. These standards are complex and involved, and are written for the manufacturer and not the average recreational boater. With few exceptions, single hull boats 20 feet and less in length must have a certification plate. This plate is the manufacturer's certification that the boat was built to meet Coast Guard standards. The plate usually tells you how many people, or how much weight, the boat can safely carry, and the recommended maximum safe horsepower for the boat.

The boat must also be properly equipped. This is the operator's responsibility. Federal regulations require that boats be equipped with such things as Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs), fire extinguishers, sound-producing devices and so forth. The best way to check whether your boat has the required equipment is to write to the Coast Guard for the pamphlet, "Federal Requirements for Recreation Boats." The pamphlet is free and will give you the information you need to equip your boat so it meets the minimum legal requirements. But, remember that the legally required equipment is only the minimum equipment necessary for safety, and that we strongly recommend that you add additional equipment suggested by the type of boating you do and the type of water you boat on.

The new "skipper" should also make sure that all the warranty cards are filled in and mailed. Registration and title papers are routinely completed and filed with proper authorities, but the warranty registration cards often are not. These cards help the manufacturer keep track of who has bought his boat in case of a recall. Should a safety related hazard be found, the manufacturer can reach you and correct the hazard. This service is free, even after the stated warranty has expired.

Knowledge of proper operating procedures and practices is vital to the safe enjoyment of our waters. To make

sure that you know what you are doing when you are out on the water, take a boating course. The Game Commission sponsors several three-night courses throughout the year with the assistance of dedicated volunteers. For information on how you can enroll in one of these classes, write or call Jack Cox, Boating Safety Coordinator, Virginia Game Commission, P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA 23230-1104, (804) 257-1000. The successful completion of some of these courses may even get you a reduced insurance rate.—*Reprinted with permission from the National Safe Boating Action Manual.*

Legislative Changes Affect Sportsmen

Several actions by the 1987 General Assembly will affect Virginia sportsmen beginning July 1, 1987. One of the most far reaching will be the requirement that all hunters afield during the firearms deer season wear a blaze orange hat or blaze orange upper body clothing visible from 360 degrees, or display at least 100 square inches within body reach, visible from all angles. Exempted are the muzzle loading deer season and persons hunting waterfowl (1) from stationary or floating blinds, (2) over decoys, (3) in marshes and swamps, or (4) from a boat or other floating conveyance. Also exempted are persons participating in hunting dog field trials under Game Commission permit.

The "body reach" provision allows hunters to use the blaze orange sash. It is worn diagonally over one shoulder when entering and leaving the woods and is fastened around a tree when the hunter is on stand. Blaze orange camouflage clothing does not qualify under current interpretation.

Another new law makes floating blind licenses exempt from the October 31 cutoff date so that they can be purchased any time after July 1. Restrictions on use within 500 yards of stationary blinds still apply.

In addition, waterfowl hunters will have the option in 1988 of buying a state waterfowl stamp, the funds from which will be used for waterfowl management work. Part of this fund-raising effort will include the sale of collectors' art prints featuring the stamp design.

Sportsmen also will have the option of buying a lifetime hunting and fishing license for $300. This license will be nontransferable and will serve in lieu of the regular resident hunting and fishing licenses (this will *not* include the big game stamp or trout license). Funds so collected are deposited in an endowment fund and the interest used as annual income. In addition, the senior citizen permanent license for residents 65 or older will not cover the trout license requirement after July 1, 1987. Holders of such a license issued before July may use it for trout, but those who buy them on or after that date will have to buy a trout license also to fish in stocked trout waters.

Fishermen whose property abuts public waters may fish in such waters from their shoreline including piers permanently attached to shore without a license. Another law affecting landowners gives them the option of posting their property against trespass by painting blazes on trees along the boundary. Such marks must be vertical silver (aluminum paint) stripes at least two inches wide and eight inches long, located no more than six feet above the land or water surface. They should be readily visible at all regular entrances and boundaries to alert persons approaching the property.

Beginning July 1, 1988, all first-time hunters and those under 16 will have to demonstrate that they have successfully completed an approved hunter education course before they can buy a hunting license. Persons 16 or over will be exempted if they can show that a resident hunting license was issued to them in prior years. Approved courses include Virginia's 10-hour course and similar programs offered in the other 49 states and Canadian Provinces. It is important that currently licensed hunters save their old licenses until they buy their new ones. For information on hunter safety courses in your area phone (804) 257-1147 or write to Hunter Safety Courses, Virginia Game Commission, P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA 23230-1104. □

Letters

Get Involved

April *Virginia Wildlife* "Letters" carried a typical sampling of the usual post-season gripes about illegitimates who hunt with little regard for ethics, courtesy, common sense or, particularly, property owners' rights. No doubt, some of the complaints are justified.

But where were the writers of these letters when the General Assembly was considering a proposal to do something about the problem, and give the Game Commission authority (that it does not now have) to do even more?

Such a bill *was* introduced, you know. It was, in effect, killed in a House subcommittee (passed by almost without debate in the full committee on recommendation of the subcommittee) because few members had heard about it from their respective constituents and there was little evidence of public support at the hearings. One delegate on the subcommittee thought the people in his rural, western Piedmont counties seemed satisfied with existing trespass laws; another representing a large, rural Southside district thought the Farm Bureau Federation (whose spokesman supported the bill) did not reflect the sentiment of his rural constitutency; and a third subcommittee member from a suburban corridor district had heard only from constitutents who seemed to oppose the proposal. That was it!

Although the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries does enforce state trespass laws, its governing body does not have delegated authority to modify them. Only the General Assembly can do that; and, if there is a need to do so, most of the senators and delegates apparently have not heard about it yet

from their respective electorates. Perhaps it is to General Assembly candidates, in this election year, rather than to *Virginia Wildlife*, that concerned sportsmen and landowners should address their suggestions.

Jim McInteer
Richmond

River Birthing Grounds

My congratulations on the fine article on the James River before dams and its educational value to the readership. Support for dam removal and/or fish passage facilities from conservation-minded Virginians may help to speed up the process.

Dr. Richard Neves
Virginia Cooperative Unit
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

As an avid fisherman, I appreciate your concern for the improvement of the James River, but I have to disagree totally with your views in the April 1987 article entitled "River Birthing Grounds."

I live west of Richmond and fish the basin between Lynchburg and Wingina as often as I can. The James and Tye Rivers offer some of the best smallmouth and bream fishing anywhere. Creating access points along the five dams between Lynchburg and Richmond, for striped bass to proceed further up the river to spawn, would start the depletion of many established species of sport fish.

I live near the Staunton River, which is one of the highly regarded spawning streams for striped bass. The stripers leave Buggs Island Lake in late April to early May, and proceed up the Staunton to their spawning run. As they venture, they eat everything they come in contact with, swim back downstream and reside in the lake the remainder of the year. Except for about three months a year (including the annual walleye run) the river is dead. Most of the sport fish are in the bellies of the stripers heading back to Buggs Island. I have spoken with many an older gentleman who has fished the Staunton before the introduction of stripers into the area. They tell me of days when smallmouth, largemouth and bream were plentiful in the river and now catches are very scattered. Could this happen on the upper James? I believe it can and will if stripers can gain access.

I agree dams are probably one of the reasons for the decline of fish in the lower basin, but your article also fails to mention the effects of kepone contamination and industrial sewage pollution which have had a detrimental impact on fish catches. It will take years for the fish to recover from these human blunders.

I can understand your intentions and the politics involved with commercial fishing. More fish means more profits for the fishing industry. Let's not take a chance and ruin established sport fishing on the upper James River by opening the "gates" for larger fish to swim upstream and devour the smaller species.

Mark Tarbet
Gretna

I share your concerns, and yes there will be impacts on existing fisheries. I hope you will be pleased to learn that most of those impacts will be beneficial.

You stated that you live near the Staunton River and are familiar with striped bass spawning runs up the river. I was the fish biologist who managed the fisheries in your area from 1974 through 1979, and also managed the Brookneal hatchery for several of those years. I, too, am most familiar with the Staunton River. I differ with your opinion, however, that striped bass eat everything they come in contact with during their spawning migrations. I opened hundreds of striped bass during my career as a fish biologist and simply did not find any species of game fish as a significant food item. Striped bass show a distinct preference for smooth-rayed fishes, those without spines in their fins. Many studies of the food habits of striped bass in other states yielded the same results, so you need not worry that striped bass will eat all the smallmouth bass and panfish. They will eat some of the suckers, chubs, and other large minnows, but studies show they will select larger forage fish, which can shift the overall population of forage fish to smaller sizes and actually benefit smallmouth bass and others predators.

You mentioned that you had talked with older fishermen who fished the Staunton River when it had much better fisheries for sunfish, smallmouth bass, and largemouth bass. I also talked with some of those fishermen. The decline of native game fish is not linked with the arrival of striped bass, but changes in water quality and river conditions. (I used the term "native" loosely, since several species such as largemouth and smallmouth bass were not native to our East Coast streams.) A most significant change from those earlier days is the amount of silt and sand now in the river. Sand and silt bury the boulders, rocks, crevices, and food that is essential in the habitat requirements of smallmouth bass. I suggest that is was habitat changes that changed the fisheries in the river, not striped bass.

We studied the impacts of the reintroduction of anadromous fish on the native populations of fish in some of the rivers of New England. The native fisheries improved primarily due to the addition of more forage. Adult shad and herring ascend the rivers to spawn in the spring, and then return to saltwater. They do not feed while on their spawning run. The eggs they leave behind hatch and the young shad and herring stay in the freshwater streams until the fall when they return to the sea. All summer long these young forage fish are available to native predators, and at least in New England, they made good use of them. The numbers of smallmouth bass increased, as did their growth rate. I think we would all welcome both increased numbers of game fish and faster growth rates.

We expect the overall impact of the return of anadromous fish to the James River to be beneficial to the bass and sunfish. We can expect a bonus of a seasonal fishery for striped bass, shad, and herring. Viewing the larger perspective of benefits to tidal rivers and the Chesapeake Bay as well as the upper James River, it is past time to return the anadromous fish to their historic spawning grounds.

Larry G. Hart
Chief, Lands & Engineering Division

V·I·R·G·I·N·I·A'·S

The Damselfly

by Nancy Hugo
photo by Michael Gadomski

W·I·L·D·L·I·F·E

They don't bite and they don't sting but they sure can tickle.

Or so I tried to tell my godchild as we tubed down the river. She was a trooper and finally let one land on her knee. Then two arrived in tandem, requiring another explanation.

The insect was a damselfly, denizen of ponds and slow moving water. When I was a child, we called them all dragonflies, but I've since learned that damselflies, which are more common than dragonflies, hold their wings together above their bodies when at rest. Dragonflies rest with their wings outstretched.

Most damselflies are also smaller than dragonflies and their many-faceted eyes bulge out to the sides rather than covering the tops of their heads as dragonflies' do.

Insects similar to dragonflies and damselflies have been around for 300 million years. During the Carboniferous Period, they often had wingspans as wide as two and a half feet. Today the largest member of the order Odonata has a wingspan of only about seven inches, but that's still a gargantuan insect by today's standards.

There are 5,000 species of damselflies and dragonflies worldwide and 450 species in North America alone. They've been known through history as snake doctors, horse stingers, and devil's darning needles. But except for their predatory efficiency, their sinister names are undeserved. I have it on good authority that they do not sew up the ears of bad boys.

What they can do is fly like blue blazes. Their iridescent bodies flash through the air like laser beams, and they are as suited to air as fish are to water. Muscles attached directly to their four independently moving wings give them unparalleled mobility. They can move forward, backward, and up and down like helicopters, and sometimes they stop in the midst of flight and abruptly change direction. You'd think their thin wings would be torn to shreds, but their heavily veined wings are elastic and endure even the most violent maneuvers.

They eat other insects like mosquitoes and midges and are highly efficient predators. Although their legs are of little use for walking, they make terrific prey baskets which they hold out in front of them to catch their prey as they fly. Even in their nymph stage, damselflies are predacious, and they thrust out a wicked-looking lower lip to capture insects in the water. Adults have sharp biting mouth parts, too, but they usually reserve them for prey. I've heard of damselflies who nibbled on shirts and of dragonflies who bit when handled, but evidently it's only the largest dragonflies (not damselflies) that can inflict a painful pinch. None has ever nibbled on my knee.

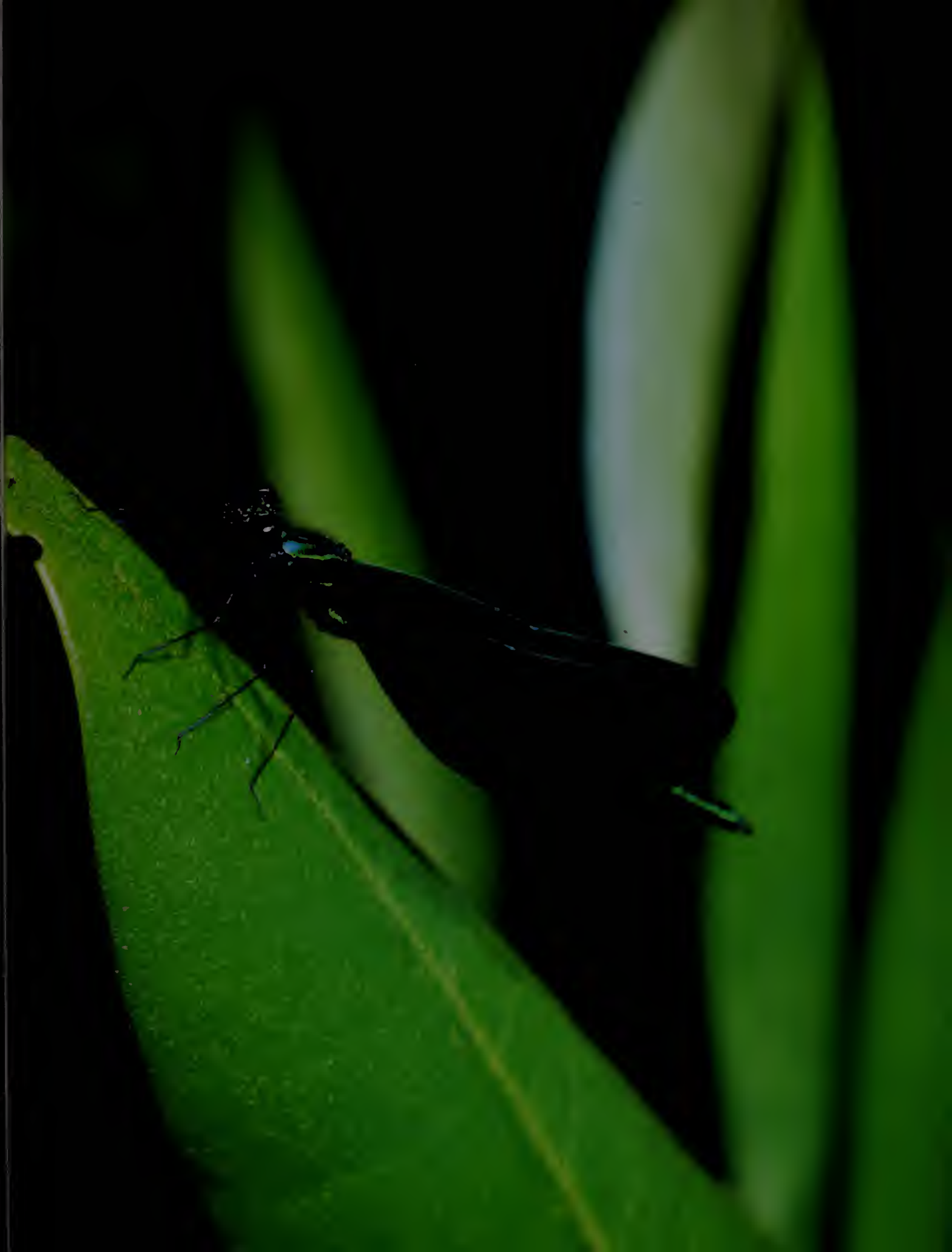
Mating is a spectacle. The male first bends the tip of his abdomen under his body to transfer sperm from the far end of his abdomen to a storage chamber on the underside of his body. Then he uses claspers on the hind end of his body to grab his female partner by the neck. This is the position in which you so often see damselflies flying in tandem. The male, often more brightly colored than the female, is in the lead.

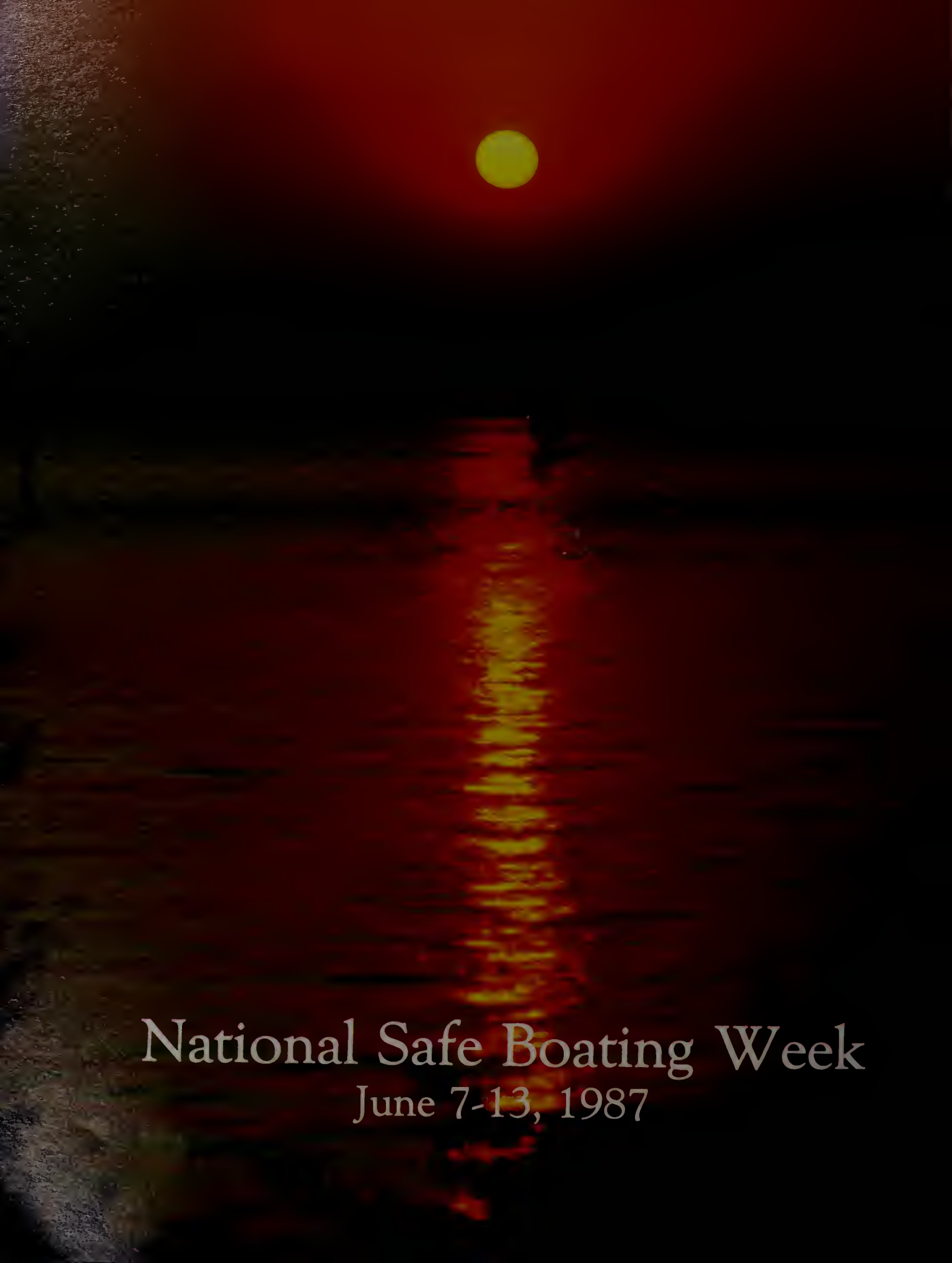
They may fly in tandem for some time or they may immediately form a "mating wheel" in which the female reaches her abdomen up to the male's body to accept his sperm. Together the male and female then fly to surrounding vegetation where the female dips her abdomen into the water to lay eggs, often in the tissue of a waterside plant. The male then takes flight, lifting his mate from the water like a helicopter.

When the eggs hatch, aquatic nymphs emerge. These molt as many as ten or fifteen times as they grow, a process that often takes about two years. When they finally emerge from their exoskeletons which they leave behind on waterside plants, the adults are nearly white. They rest until blood slowly fills the veins of their wings, their bodies harden, and they are ready to fly off.

Both damselfly nymphs and adults are efficient predators, devouring huge numbers of mosquitoes—which is a good reason as any for letting a damselfly land on your knee. The alternative might have been a mosquito. □

Nancy Hugo is a freelance outdoor writer who lives in Ashland.




National Safe Boating Week
June 7-13, 1987